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Human and Divine Knowledge in the Oedipus Tyrannus

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HUMAN AND DIVINE KNOWLEDGE
IN THE OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

by
James C. L. Arimond, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
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LIFE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The theory of the duality of worlds and the distinction between the reality of knowledge and the illusion of opinion has most often been discussed in reference to Plato's Republic, where, in Books VI and VII, he laid the foundations for his theory of knowledge in the two worlds of the forms and images, and then proceeded to show how man, through his own power of understanding must rise from the darkness of the cave to the light of the sun. However, the actual distinction between the two orders could be said to have had its roots even earlier than in Plato, i.e. in fifth-century Greek literature.

It is the purpose of this research, then, to dig up those roots, to lay them bare. In doing so it should become evident that the genesis of this philosophical problem reached its climax in the most famous play of the period -- the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles; for of all the extant Greek tragedies, the Oedipus Tyrannus had as its dominant theme the search for true knowledge. Sophocles, in trying to explicate the riddle of man, created a drama whose core was Oedipus' discovery of the truth about himself. In doing this the playwright dramatized the illusions and the ignorances of Oedipus and their collapse. In their ruin was his climax; in their discord with reality, his conflict; in their failure to resist the truth, his tragic fall. Therefore, for Sophocles the knowledge about
the situation became in time the hero's knowledge about himself. But, before this self-knowledge could be attained, Oedipus had to waver between the illusion of human knowledge and the reality of divine knowledge.

This, then, will be the basic theme of this thesis, and, if it appears to be a rather strange approach to the study of such a well-known play, then this thesis will have achieved its purpose. For it must be made clear that this research will not approach the Oedipus Tyrannus in the usual manner, i.e. as a moral analysis of Oedipus and his actions. For, as H. D. F. Kitto says:

the formative and controlling idea in a Greek play --always excluding those which are not really tragic--is some religious or philosophical conception, and the interest which the dramatist takes in the story, or in the persons is always--I will not say subordinated to this, but strictly correlated with it.\(^1\)

The practical consequence of this existence of a religious or philosophical concept as something primary in relation to plots and characters is the presence of two distinct planes or levels in any given play, one divine and the other human. In the play about to be analyzed the two distinct levels were concerned with the area of knowledge. After explaining, in Chapter II, the origins of the distinction between human and divine knowledge as it was developed by many pre-Sophoclean writers, and, after a discussion in Chapter III of the effect of this distinction on the social and political environment of Sophocles' times, in Chapter IV the main purpose of this thesis will be developed, an explanation of the action of

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Oedipus Tyrannus in terms of the distinction between human and divine knowledge. Finally, in Chapter V, this distinction will be applied to exemplify Sophocles' basic concept of man, a concept based on man's relation to the gods, which was an answer to the growing problems of his age.

Prior, however, to the survey of pre-Sophoclean thought on human and divine knowledge, it might be advantageous to explain in greater detail the difference between the approach used in this thesis and those used by recent critics of Sophocles.

A survey of recent Sophoclean criticism must necessarily begin with Sir Richard Jebb, for his work around the turn of this century fixed the point at which all future editions of Sophocles must begin. If Jebb were to center on any one predominant motivation beyond the beauty of the work itself, it must be said that he would choose "piety," though he never developed this view to any great length.

The first great change and reawakening of Sophoclean criticism came in 1917 with the publication of Tycho von Wilamowitz' Die Dramatische Technik des Sophokles. His basic theory was that Sophocles worked primarily for the optimum effect of particular scenes, a desire that even forced Sophocles to sacrifice the unity and harmony of the play as a whole. Wilamowitz particularly ignored all psychological explanations of motive, because he felt that the Sophoclean characters were no further characterized psychologically than required by what they had to do and say in order to make any particular scene artistically effective. Action and character were deter-

mined primarily by the myth, and then further by the technical limitations. Wilamowitz seemed to ignore all the moral problems of the plays by making their purpose a mere display of art for art's sake.

In direct contrast to Wilamowitz was Wolfgang Schadewalt who treated Sophocles as a psychologist would. He insisted that many of the characters underwent change, a character-change which implied a value-change. Hence, the whole inner world, which Wilamowitz had ignored, came into play. Schadewalt's theory of Sophoclean tragedy was stated as: "Man, overthrown by a fate which he unwittingly brought upon himself, comes to his right mind and conquers himself, and thereby his fate, in his own destruction." Such an interpretation was nothing but the sin and punishment theory at work again -- a modern adaptation of Aristotle's tragic flaw theory.

Although Schadewalt allowed Sophocles a moral function, it remained for Max Pohlenz to show how the Greek dramatist performed that function, and what his moral position was. In his general treatise, Die griechische Tragodie, Pohlenz tried to show that Sophocles stepped into Aeschylus' shoes as teacher of the people and proved himself a strong religious conservative, even reactionary, who reflected the released individualism of the times in the artistic viewpoint of his plays, and yet defended the old groundwork of Aeschylean religion.

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4 Ibid., 79.

5 Max Pohlenz, Die griechische Tragodie (Leipzig und Berlin, 1930), p. 163.
This antinomy between individualism and Aeschylean religion was a difficult one to show, and Whitman does not believe that Pohlenz fully achieved it.

The last two Sophoclean critics to be mentioned are Karl Reinhardt and Heinrich Weinstock. Although Reinhardt did not offer a complete understanding of Sophocles' work, one general theory did emerge, that of the isolation of the protagonists. But, for the most part, Reinhardt stressed the moral and religious questions in individual situations, and not dogma. Weinstock's work was obviously influenced by the existentialist philosophy to which he adhered, for he interpreted Sophocles as the depicter of life as it was. The various characters were shown to be examples of the heroic human spirit and not examples of various "tragic flaws." Their chief responsibility was one for the present.

In all of these critics' theories, which ranged from art for art's sake to various types of sin and punishment, the classic approach to Sophocles seemed to waver a bit here and there, but to refuse to give way entirely. The old assumptions still remained with their roots firmly planted in the earliest of all formulae for tragedy, the Aristotelian theory of hamartia. It can possibly be said that all Sophoclean criticism has been affected to some degree by the hamartia theory. Not everyone has embraced it wholeheartedly, and very few have been foolish enough to interpret all seven Sophoclean tragedies by its principles. One reason for this varied adherence is the lack of universal agreement as to what is meant by the "tragic flaw."

6Karl Reinhardt, Sophokles (Frankfurt am Main, 1933).

7Heinrich Weinstock, Sophokles (Leipzig und Berlin, 1931).
When Aristotle spoke of the "tragic flaw," he did not say that he meant Sophocles' Oedipus, but his admiration for the play was so great that it is hard not to think that he did. The real problem is what he meant by a "mistake" or a "flaw." For the last seventy-five years scholars have tried to answer the question whether it is an intellectual or a moral failing in the tragic hero that brings about his change into misfortune. Representative of these two theories would be those of Ingram Bywater and S. H. Butcher.

Bywater maintained that Aristotle thought hamartia was an "error of judgment," an intellectual mistake. If Aristotle meant this, then his own views would lead to Oedipus' acquittal. For Aristotle said that such mistakes originated not in vice or depravity but in ignorance of fact or

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8Cf. Aristotle, Poetics 1453a16.


circumstance, were not voluntary, and should be forgiven. Now it is perfectly true that when Oedipus killed Laius he made a mistake of this kind. He acted out of ignorance that Laius was his father, and this was the beginning of his downfall; for it led to the plague, the curse, the discovery of the truth, and Oedipus' blinding of himself. Because of his mistake Oedipus changed from good to bad fortune.

According to Butcher, however, it is possible that Aristotle meant a different kind of mistake, something more like a moral fault of character which would lead a man to see things wrongly. Aristotle did not say this, but it is possible that he meant it. If so, it would seem that Aristotle came very near the truth. For Oedipus' character was undeniably connected with the form that his downfall took.

Neither interpretation, however, of Aristotle's view of a tragic mistake explains all the facts of the Oedipus Tyrannus. Whichever be preferred, Aristotle still missed one vitally important element in the Oedipus Tyrannus. He said nothing about the part taken by the gods in the rise and fall of Oedipus. His omission is understandable since he was apparently not interested in this aspect of tragedy and did not, therefore, discuss it in his Poetics. But such an omission seriously impaired his view. For, though Oedipus' mistake in killing his father led to other disasters, it was itself foreordained by the gods. The tragic career of Oed'pus did not begin with the parricide. His doom was fixed before his birth. From a consider-

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13 Cf. Chapter IV, infra, p. 52ff.
ation of Oedipus' foreordained doom will arise a better understanding of the somewhat novel approach of this thesis.

In the previous outlines of some of the modern critics of Sophocles, and in the two above-mentioned interpretations of Aristotle's theory of hamartia as applied to Oedipus there was a heavy concentration on the moral question connected with the play. But, while such is one approach to the tragedy of Oedipus, there is another, for

if Sophocles had wanted to consider the problem of right and wrong, he would have dramatized the scene at the crossroads. Instead he has dramatized the search for the murderer; the whole action is therefore devoted to the effort to draw truth out of the uncertainty and ignorance which at first center around the plague and later begin to gather more and more ominously around the king himself.\(^\text{14}\)

Here Whitman states that the emphasis Sophocles placed in his play was not so much on why Oedipus fell, but rather on how he learned that he would fall. This would be an entirely different interpretation, one that would show the audience a basic truth about mankind, not one solely peculiar to Oedipus.

A. E. Haigh, in his Tragic Drama of the Greeks, discusses this same point with relation to the approach Aeschylus took to the Oedipus myth. He says:

The aim of Aeschylus, in his three tragedies, was to trace the course of ancestral guilt, and to exhibit the mysterious workings of destiny during successive generations. Hence, it may be inferred that, in his treatment of the story, the emphasis was laid, more on the causes and effects of the crime of Oedipus, than on the actual process of discovery. Sophocles, on the other hand, prefers to concentrate the interest upon a single point of time, and gives a different moral to the legend, converting it into a picture of blindness and fallibility of mankind. To effect this purpose he devotes the greater part of the play to the gradual discovery of the murder and incest, and makes

\(^{14}\text{Whitman, op. cit., p. 125.}\)
Oedipus himself the author of the discovery, and the unconscious agent in his own destruction. It was he who persists in unravelling the fatal secret, in spite of warnings to the contrary, because he thinks it will benefit himself and his neighbors. He catches at each hint, and pursues each clue with light and cheerful heart, little dreaming that every step brings him nearer to the precipice; and it is only when he has reached the very brink, and the truth is revealed, that he perceives, when too late, the extent of his previous folly.  

Although Haigh may have put a little too much weight on the fact that Oedipus was solely responsible for the discovery, he has stated well the emphasis that is properly the play's—the intellectual process of discovery and not the moral cause or guilt that underlies Oedipus' fall.

If the play is to be considered under this aspect, i.e. how Oedipus learned that he would fall and not why he fell, it must be assumed that Oedipus' fate was a divine proclamation, an assumption which will act as the presupposition of the play, and not the content. Hans Diller, in his monograph, Göttliches und menschliches Wissen bei Sophokles, confirms this presupposition in the light of a contrast between the Aeschylean-Euripidean and the Sophoclean concept of the original oracle given to Laius. He says:


It is the view of Diller, then, that Oedipus is really absolved of any guilt. Therefore, the question of divine justice or injustice is ignored. Throughout the Oedipus Tyrannus, though it be true that the guiding force is the will of human beings, and yet that their will is free, still, "the action is in accordance with the will of Zeus or destiny, and often this will have been revealed long before in oracles, which men in their folly have failed to comprehend, or tried to evade."  

Therefore, the actual question of whether Oedipus acted morally or not will not be taken up in this thesis; it is beside the point. "The point is that it [the act of vengeance] is the inevitable consequence of the original crime."  

Now that certain exclusions have been made from this thesis, it is time to look at the problem positively. The main purpose of the thesis can be stated very simply: to study the action of the play as a winding path between illusion and reality, i.e. between human and divine knowledge. The explanation of the action of the play is necessarily two-fold, for, as J. C. Opstelten says, Sophocles stressed "the delusion of man, the insignificance of human greatness against the background of the might of the

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For, just as Sophocles could not point up the nature of man without a contrast with the divine, so, too, he could not use the element of knowledge to exemplify this contrast without depicting its opposite—illusion. Diller affirms this, when he says:

Allerdings kann Wissen nicht Gegenstand dramatischer Gestaltung sein ohne die Antithetik zu seinem negativen Gegenpol, zu Irrtum, Trug und Schein, und so wird in der Tat bei Sophokles immer wieder ein menschliches, unvollkommenes, bedingtes Wissen gegen ein göttliches, vollkommenes, unbedingtes abgesetzt und in Auseinandersetzung mit ihm gezeigt.  

This winding path between human and divine knowledge, was made possible by the fact that what had already happened before the play began was now waiting only for its revelation. The gods had known Oedipus' fate; they had revealed it to him, but, because of the character of his human knowledge, he could not comprehend it. Freedom of choice for Oedipus did not enter into the picture; his duty was simply to find out what had already been decided for him. Diller puts it this way:

Dass es auch da noch auszweichen versucht, wo von vornherein gar kein Ausweg gelassen wurde, ist bekanntlich die Grundlage des Ödipus-Schicksals ...

In der Handlung ist insofern die letzte Konsequenz aus dem Character der sophokleischen Tragödie als eines Weges zwischen Nichtwissen und Erkennen gezogen, als hier alles bereits geschen ist un nur noch auf seine Entstellung wartet, Freiheit der Wahl also auch als Vorspiegelung nicht mehr vorhanden ist.  

Therefore, this thesis will study the process of how Oedipus came to this


20 Diller, op. cit., p. 5.

21 Ibi., p. 18.
revelation—to the knowledge of the truth—and not why he was destroyed.

To a reader accustomed to the usual moral criticism that seems to spring up so naturally around Greek tragedy, this thesis may appear to be lacking in the discussion of such concepts as "justice," or "morality," and Sophocles' own personal convictions about such. But I firmly believe the fact that this "moral in-reading" can often go to great extremes, especially with Greek tragedy. Opstelten, I think, states it best, when he says that it is often difficult in Sophocles' works to lay a precise finger on his own personal convictions. The purity of his conscience as an artist made it as unnecessary for him to reason out and render an account of his own view of life as to justify the rule of the gods before the tribunal of man's sense of righteousness. 'Sophocles does not affect,' Mackall correctly writes, (Lect. 155) 'to explain life; he hardly criticizes it. He shows things happening and how they happen, but not why'.

Finally, this thesis, having analyzed the epistemological theme of the Oedipus Tyrannus, will draw out from this analysis some general conclusions regarding the concept of man and his relationship to the gods as found in the Oedipus Tyrannus. It is a concept that would fit well with the modern world's concept of man—an existential theory of man that stresses the tragedy of human existence. Victor Ehrenberg sums it all up when he says that the fate of Sophocles' heroes does not depend on their moral or immoral conduct. Their tragedy is that, in spite of their faults and misdeeds, they are 'innocent', or perhaps better put, outside the standards of guilt and innocence. Their tragedy is the tragedy of man, of the very fact of being a human being. Man is a toy in the hands of superhuman forces. It is the

\[22\] Opstelten, op. cit., p. 50.
gods' rule over man that is called 'fate', and man's reaction against it, which makes human life great as well as tragic. Man is born into a world which is the work of the gods, in its good as well as its evil things. It is this world which man has to face, in which and with which he has to live, and in which he has to prove his worth. His fate is bound up with the divine order of the world, and tragedy occurs by the clash between divine order and human disorder. 

Finally, a word is needed with respect to the sources used in preparing this thesis. There are two common editions of the Oedipus Tyrannus with accompanying English translations—those of Sir Richard Jebb and J. T. Sheppard. For the citations from the play used in this thesis I have chosen Sheppard's edition for the simple reasons that this edition is more recent and that the English of the translation is slightly more modern than that found in Jebb's edition. It should also be noted that the bibliographical list of secondary book sources seems disproportionately long in comparison with the list of articles. This is due to the fact that the number of articles dealing with the particular problem in Sophoclean tragedy treated in this thesis was found to have been rather small. Many other articles dealing with various elements of Sophoclean criticism were consulted, but only those cited in the text of this thesis were included in the bibliography.


Before examining the doctrine of the conflict of human and divine knowledge, a theme so central in Sophocles' thought, especially in his best known play, the Oedipus Tyrannus, I think it quite necessary to investigate any treatments of this doctrine by writers prior to and contemporary with the age of Sophocles, for Sophocles was by no means the first person to bring this distinction between human and divine knowledge to the attention of the public. Though he may have been the first to do so through the medium of the stage, his basic ideas on this subject can be found in much of the literature which preceded him.

Though there may have been an evolution of this doctrine, and various later writers may have exerted an influence on Sophocles, it must clearly be understood that Sophocles was not necessarily well-acquainted with all of the previous literature which will be discussed in this chapter. Hans Diller, in discussing the relationship of Heraclitus to Sophocles, makes this point clear when he says:

Diese Feststellung diene nicht zum Nachweis literarischer oder geistesgeschichtlicher Abhängigkeiten, wohl aber zur Befestigung der Einsicht, wie sehr in einer geistig geschlossenen Zeit das Werk des Philosophen und des Tragikers von denselben Kräften bewegt wird.¹

¹Diller, op. cit., p. 31.
Therefore, the relationships between the various earlier authors and their influence on Sophocles can best be attributed to the closely unified intellectual age and religious ethos in which these men lived and wrote. In this survey of pre-Sophoclean thought on the nature and distinction of human and divine knowledge, the most relevant authors are the pre-Socratic philosophers, although it is not profitable to omit four of the more important early poets—Homer, Hesiod, Solon, and Theognis, because their views on this subject, though scattered and often not fully explicated, do present man's first efforts at investigating this perplexing problem of knowledge.

Homer's invocations at the opening of both the Iliad and the Odyssey were those of a bard whose words did not flow from his own genius or from his individual experience, but who was inspired by a deity: the Muse of Epic Poetry, Calliope. Homer, however, presented his most explicit invocation dealing with human and divine knowledge in the prelude to the "Catalogue of the Ships" in Book II of the Iliad. Here he addressed the Olympian Muses, asking them to inspire him—

— for ye are goddesses and are at hand and know all things, whereas we hear but rumor and know not anything—²

Here Homer was distinguishing between the exact knowledge of the eyewitness and hearsay. The goddesses were the eyewitnesses because they were always at hand. Therefore, they were superior to man for they had seen everything and knew it at the present; the poet was simply the tool of the Muses. They,


ἠμέες γὰρ θείας ἔστε, πώρεστε ἐστε, ἵστε τὰ πάντα,
ἡμέες δὲ κλέος ὑπὸν ἐνεῳμένον εἰδεῖ ἐστίν ἡμὲν.
being omnipresent, provided the poet with what could be called a mental picture. Dark rumor was transformed into a product of the Muses; it became poetry. Bruno Snell sums it up when he says:

... the uncomplicated views which he [Homer] holds concerning knowledge always apply in the same stable ratio: the wider the experience, the greater the knowledge. The eyewitness commands a better knowledge than the recipient of hearsay. The experience of the Muses who were always present is complete; that of men is restricted. Provided the Muses share their experience with the singer, he needs to contribute only an adequate performance of his physical organs. ³

In the words of Hesiod the problem of human and divine knowledge was conceived in the same context as the Homeric—that of the relation between the Muses and men. But, from the beginning of his Theogony, Hesiod had a somewhat different description of man’s relation to the Muses. Very early in the Theogony Hesiod said:

And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me—the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: "Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many falsehoods as though they were true; but we know, when we will, how to utter the truth." ⁴

In these lines it would seem that Hesiod was not content with the Muses


giving him a clear picture of the facts to relate one particular event, as Homer was in his cataloguing of the ships. No, Hesiod stressed that once in the past the Muses on Helicon had taught him the art of song. His whole status as a poet was a special gift of the Muses. He, like Homer, considered truth to be a gift of the deity, coming through revelation, but in a special way. He, in a sense, had been infused with true knowledge. When the Muses themselves said that they knew many false things which resembled the truth, they were, perhaps, using Hesiod to refer to those singers who, like Homer, learned from the Muses all sorts of matters which could not possibly be known with any degree of accuracy. But, since the Muses had told him the truth, they had raised him above the level of his class. Ordinary men had no knowledge except that reported to them by Hesiod, the poet of infused truth. Thus, Snell says:

The songs of others appeared to him as folly or lies. There is, thus, a correlation between these two facts: Hesiod looks upon himself as a special type of man, and his truth is of a special perfection. He is subjective in the sense that he has his own understanding of what objective truth is. His knowledge, in fine, stands half way between the divine knowledge of the Muses and the human knowledge of the fools.5

With Hesiod, whose poetry embodied ethical maxims and practical instructions adapted to the life of a peasant, there is a logical comparison of two elegiac poets who represented the aristocratic urban classes: Solon and Theognis.

Solon (c. 640-c. 558 B.C.) was the first Attic poet. In his elegies he often dealt with moral, political, and social subjects. The first of

5Snell, op. cit., p. 139.
these demands consideration. Solon was quite concerned about the moral relation between gods and men, and, although he did not by any means give a full explication of his theory of knowledge, his basic ideas on this subject can be gathered from a few fragments. In one lone fragment, he said:

The mind of the immortals is all unseen to man.\(^6\)

Here the poet implied that the thoughts of the gods remained a riddle to men, that it was useless for men to attempt to outsmart the gods. And what would be the result if they did attempt to do so? Speaking of the violation of the balance of nature, Solon said that this balance must be restored, and that no man knew how or when:

Aye, one payeth today, another tomorrow; and those who themselves flee and escape the pursuing destiny of Heaven, to them vengeance cometh again, for the price of their seed after them.\(^7\)

Solon continued, saying that a man's only hope was to pray to the gods, and to be dependent on them lest he overstep his limitations. So, he drew a moral conclusion from his thoughts on the relation of men to gods, something not seen in Homer or Hesiod.

Theognis, who flourished in the second half of the sixth century B.C., devoted his elegies to Cyrus to moral exhortations enjoining piety and moderation in conduct. A few fragments from these suffice to elucidate

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\(^7\) Ibid. Frag. 13, 29-32.
Theognis' position on the problem. The following presented his basic doctrine:

'Tis hard indeed to see how God will accomplish the end of a matter yet undone; for 'tis all dark, and the ending of perplexity is not for man to understand ere what is to be. 8

Here Theognis was concerned with the future, the destiny of man. The gods knew the answer, but man could not understand how, for he lived and understood only the present. Even present actions became aimless due to this lack of foreknowledge. According to Theognis,

We men practice vain things, knowing nought, while the gods accomplish all to their mind. 9

According to Theognis, the gods, despite what humans did, meted out to men prosperity or disaster according to their own inscrutable pleasure. 10 But, men must not despair at this thought, for there was a remedy. The god's pleasure was not just mere caprice, for man must learn to pray to the gods; although the gods' intentions were above the reach of man's understanding, their power demanded man's veneration:

Pray to the Gods; with the Gods is power; it is certain

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9 Ibid., pp. 141-42.

10 Cf. Theognis 161ff.
that without the Gods man obtains neither good nor ill.\textsuperscript{11}

The basic notions of these four poets—Homer, Hesiod, Solon, and Theognis—on the relationship between human and divine knowledge, and the moral implications of the last two, led to the exposition of the more scientific concepts of the pre-Socratic philosophers.

The first philosopher to be considered is Xenophanes, who lived a long life extending over the greater part of the sixth century B.C. For him, knowledge was basically experience. He said:

No man knows, or ever will know, the truth about the gods and about everything I speak of; for even if one chanced to say the complete truth, yet oneself knows it not; but seeming is wrought over all things (or fancy is wrought in the case of men).\textsuperscript{12}

Considering the words \textit{εἰδεν}, \textit{εἰδὼς}, and \textit{ὅδε} to be connected with the action of seeing, Xenophanes was saying that men had seen little, and therefore knew little. But, it is important to notice that he did admit that men could know or see some things. He defined more accurately the contrast between what was reliably known, the certain, and what was not. No one knew \textit{θεοφαίας}, what was clear and evident; one knew only \textit{δόκοι}. Homer distinguished between the exact knowledge of the eyewitness, be he god (Muse)
or man, and hearsay. Xenophanes felt that human knowledge was in its very

distinctive essence deceptive, for, although man might hit upon the truth, he could never

"know" or "see" that he had done so.

But if human knowledge was imperfect, because men could experience

only appearances (δόξα) and not truth itself, what about divine knowledge?

How did the deity differ from man? Fragment 23 stated:

One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar

to mortals either in body or in thought. 13

Xenophanes no longer viewed the gods in the human shape which forced itself

upon the naive mind of Homer. Having seen the divine as a comprehensive

unity, Xenophanes attempted to break with the notion of a multitude of

anthropomorphic gods. Yet the god that this poet understood still resembled

man in that wisdom which was the highest attainment of man and which played

the same role for the deity. Man's knowledge, however, was imperfect, but

the wisdom of the god was faultless. And why? Because

All of him sees, all thinks, and all hears. 14

Bruno Snell comments on this fragment:

Gross anthropomorphism is left far behind; the deity is conceived

as possessing none of the human organs of perception such as ear

and eye. With its whole being it absorbs its experience, and the

very fullness of this experience constitutes the essence of the

divinity. 15

13 Ibid. Frag. 23.

eis theos, en te eidos kai en anthropois meiotos,

outhe d'eras dunamein anthropocos outhe noia.

14 Ibid. Frag. 24.

osios ostra osios s' onetai, osios de t' ikouei.

15 Snell, op. cit., p. 141.
Having considered the basic difference between Xenophon's ideas of human and divine knowledge, that the latter was perfect, since god was all experience, while the former was imperfect on account of man's contact solely with appearances, there remains a closer examination of the human element.

As mentioned above, even though man's knowledge was of its essence deceptive, yet the highest attainment for man was wisdom. This may seem a bit contradictory. On the one hand Xenophanes said:

If god had not made yellow honey,
men would consider figs far sweeter. 16

Human knowledge was here depicted as basically deceptive, since appearances governed man's experience. But all was not lost for man, for Xenophanes also stated:

Yet the gods have not revealed all things to men from the beginning; but by seeking men find out better in time. 17

On this point Snell comments:

Even before him [Xenophanes] Archilochus and Sappho had discovered that by their own strength—not, as Hesiod, with the help of the deity—they were able to arrive at a number of personal value judgments. All these trends meet in Xenophanes and add up to something new: wisdom is the highest goal of man; our knowledge as such is obscure, but it is illumined by searching. 18

Here, then, with Xenophanes, there arose the new notion that men

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16 Xenophanes, op. cit., Frag. 38.

17 Ibid., Frag. 18.

18 Snell, op. cit., p. 140.
acquired their knowledge through their own striving, that even though they might never arrive at complete enlightenment they always were capable of searching out better things. Hesiod thought he stood midway between divine and human knowledge; with Xenophanes man's own initiative for the first time became important for acquisition of knowledge and for the bridging of the gulf that lay between men and gods.

It was the doctrine on human and divine knowledge of Heraclitus of Ephesus, who flourished around 500 B.C., which most influenced Sophocles some fifty years later. Heraclitus' Fragment 78 stated his theory of the dichotomy between divine and human knowledge.

Human disposition does not have true judgment, but divine disposition does. 19

Whereas the men previously considered thought experience to be the middle term between divine and human knowledge, Heraclitus now turned off in a completely new direction. He interpreted the divine substance more abstractly. While Xenophanes considered god as experience, Heraclitus thought of god as Mind (νόστος). This Mind was the ultimate goal of human knowledge:

Wisdom is one—to know the intelligence by which all things are steered through all things. 20

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But to attain this Heraclitus demanded an intensive approach rather than the extensive searching of experience. The deity no longer had a great memory which it shared with men, as in the case of the Muses of Homer and Hesiod, nor did man’s investigation dissipate itself in several directions, as in the case of Xenophanes. All experience, necessary as it was, remained without value for Heraclitus, unless it led to an intensive understanding of the λόγος, i.e. of the unity of the deity. How man attained this will be seen later on. But first Heraclitus’ distinction between divine and human knowledge must be looked into more closely.

As mentioned above, Fr. 78 stated that the divine race had insight or true judgment, whereas the human race did not. The divine insight was based on the fact that it saw the unity in things, whereas human thought always divided that unity in its judgment. Heraclitus said in Fr. 102:

To god all things are beautiful and good and just, but men have supposed some things to be unjust, others just. 21

And why did the deity see the unity in things? Hans Diller says: "Die Gottheit weiss die Einheit der Gegensätze, weil sie selbst die Einheit des in menschlichen Denken Zerspaltenen ist." 22 A good example of this is seen in the following story from Homer as related by Heraclitus:

Men are deceived in their knowledge of things that are manifest— even as Homer was, although he was the wisest of all the Greeks. For he was even deceived by boys killing lice when they said to him: "What we have seen and grasped, these we leave behind; whereas

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21 Heraclitus Frag. 102, The Presocratic Philosophers.

what we have not seen and grasped, these we carry away.\textsuperscript{23}

Diller brings out the significance of this fragment when he says:

Der Mensch, der aus der Sicherheit seiner Einseitigkeit herausgerissen, aber noch nicht zur göttlichen Einsicht durchgedrungen ist, steht in der Situation dessen, den ungelöste Rätsel quälen. So braucht Heraclit als Gleichnis des menschlichen Verhältnisses zur Wahrheitserkenntnis dies Geschichten von Homer, der ein einfaches Kinder-Rätsel nicht lösen konnte, weil ihm der eine Begriff fehlte, der die scheinbaren Paradoxien zur sinnvollen Einheit verband.\textsuperscript{24}

Therefore, those things which were most important for man's existence seemed strange because man did not see the unity of the \textit{λόγος} that lay behind the appearances. And so, Heraclitus said:

The Law, though men associate with it most closely, yet they are separated from it, and those things which they encounter daily seem to them strange.\textsuperscript{25}

Could man ever hope to reach the unity the deity saw, and, if so, how? Did man have understanding or knowledge at all? Heraclitus stated in Frag. 93:

The Lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks out

\textsuperscript{23}Heraclitus Frag. 56, *Heraclitus*. 
\textsuperscript{24}Diller, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

nor conceals, but gives a sign.\textsuperscript{26}

Once again Diller provides an explanation:

Die Gotthet redet in der Sprache ihres Wissen, der Mensch versteht nach der Fähigkeit seiner Aufnahmeorgane und versteht notwendig falsch, aber nicht, weil die Gottheit ihm irrreführen will, sondern aus der strukturellen Verschiedenheit göttlicher und menschlicher Einsicht heraus.\textsuperscript{27}

Therefore, Heraclitus would say that the gods did give signs of the $\lambda\omicron\omicron\gamma\omicron\omicron\varsigma$, that the visible signs which men received were a means of attaining the invisible, the understanding of the $\lambda\omicron\omicron\gamma\omicron\omicron\varsigma$. For Heraclitus these visible signs were symbols in which the wise man could catch a glimpse of the profound secrets of life. But men could not do this by an orderly means of analysis, for the basic human intellectual structure divided any existing unity. He could only understand by intuition. In this connection Snell says:

For the understanding of this \textit{logos} he [Heraclitus] does not propose a mystic communion, nor does he demonstrate a methodical approach. He urges men to be watchful, and to pay heed to what nature has to say (fr. 112). In as much as the \textit{logos} pervades everything it manifests itself in the individual also; and yet 'it is set apart from all things' (fr. 108) since it transcends the particular. The mysterious essence, the vital tension, reveals itself through particular events which man uses as symbols to apprehend the divine.\textsuperscript{28}

But did \textbf{all} men have this basic intuition? Heraclitus said \textbf{no.}

He believed that he himself partook of divine knowledge, that his comprehension of the role of the deity in the world (i.e. of the $\lambda\omicron\omicron\gamma\omicron\omicron\varsigma$)

\textsuperscript{26}Heraclitus Frag. 93, \textit{The Presocratic Philosophers}.
\begin{verbatim}
dein o're ta mnemeion esti to ev Deleos ou'te leges ou'te krustes alla sornenai.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{27}Diller, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 30-31.

\textsuperscript{28}Snell, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 146.
transcended the opinions held by the mass of the people. The divine element
was rooted in the depth of the soul. Anyone might manifest its effect in
his speech, provided his words were based on the λόγος common to all. But
how many had done this? Very few, for most men were too concerned with
experience, and had not done as Heraclitus had:

I have searched myself.29

Snell comments:

The idea of divine knowledge has ceased to be that of the Muses
who are present everywhere and have seen everything; nor is it
that of the god of Xenophanes who is all experience. Similarly
the folly of men which Heraclitus ridicules differs from the
ignorance criticized by his predecessors. Men are not awake, he
says, they resemble those who are in a deep sleep (fr. 1; 73; 89),
or they may be likened to the drunken (fr. 117); they are like children
(frs. 70; 79; 121) or like the beasts, a charge that recurs time
after time (frs. 4; 9; 13; 29; 37; 83; 97).30

In summary, then, Heraclitus thought of ordinary man as actually
existing between the gods and the beasts, that the universal principle,
the λόγος, really appeared in the world in different degrees of perfection.
As an intellectual principle the λόγος could be seen in its highest and
perfect form in the deity and in its inferior form in the intelligence of man.
As a vital principle it comprised both man and beast. Therefore, there was
only one knowledge, only one unity, which, as it proceeded down from its
highest degree of perfection, was divided and separated more and more.

Although not really a philosopher by profession, Alcmaeon of Croton,
in his studies on men and animals, discussed the various kinds of knowledge.

29Heraclitus Frag. 101, Heraclitus.

30Snell, op. cit., p. 145.
He was a physician who flourished in the fifth century B.C. He began his treatise On Nature with these words:

Concerning things unseen and things mortal the gods see clearly, but so far as men may conjecture...

In commenting on this fragment, Bruno Snell points out the basic doctrine of Alcmaeon with regard to divine and human knowledge. He says:

Here the ancient distinction between two types of knowledge, the human and the divine, has become associated with the contrast between things visible and invisible; the assumption seems to be that men have some intelligence of the visible world, while the 'non-apparent'—that is the literal meaning of Alcmaeon's term—may be ascertained only by the gods. As in Homer and in Xenophanes, to know is basically to see; it is concerned with what is distinct and clear, the saphes which we have already encountered in Xenophanes. Alcmaeon differs from Homer and Xenophanes in that at the opposite pole he places, not that which is known only from hearsay, or what belongs to the realm of assumption and semblance, but the non-evident, or better still the not-yet-evident, for he points to a path by which man may at least come closer to the invisible. This is Conjecture, the drawing of conclusions from clear indications.

This distinction between the visible and the invisible was first discussed in Heraclitus, but there the visible signs were means of getting to the invisible only through intuition. But with Alcmaeon, man's own intelligence came into play much more. He said that it was man's own struggle, his objective quest and purposeful striving which resulted in understanding. Man proceeded from sense experience and approached the invisible by an orderly method of analysis, by a primitive form of induction.

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32 Snell, op. cit., p. 146.
Snell goes on to point out more scientifically how Alcmaeon analysed the various kinds of knowledge both psychologically and physiologically. The result was that he placed man between the deity and the beasts, similar to the doctrine of Heraclitus. The one big difference was that, whereas Heraclitus recognized only various degrees of understanding, Alcmaeon distinguished three different kinds of knowledge. The beasts only grasped appearances through sense impressions; men combined sense impressions to make conjectures about the invisible; and the gods comprehended the invisible. In this way, Alcmaeon attempted to push beyond the limits of ordinary human knowledge, though in a much more refined way than anything attempted by Xenophanes. In the period being discussed in this chapter, Alcmaeon's doctrine was the most advanced and the most optimistic with regard to man's capabilities for knowledge.

The last two pre-Socratic philosophers to be considered here were contemporaries of Sophocles. Both Parmenides and Empedocles flourished around the middle of the fifth century B.C., the former about 470 B.C. and the latter about 450 B.C. It is somewhat surprising, and also very important, to note that with these two men there was a return to the earlier doctrines on human and divine knowledge, though both had worked them out more carefully than their predecessors.

Two fragments of Parmenides suffice to reveal the basic elements of his doctrine. The first of these considered man as knowing nothing. He said:

(I hold thee back), from that way also on which mortals wander knowing nothing; for helplessness
guides the wandering thought in their breasts. The second fragment declared that men had only apparent knowledge, while at the same time Parmenides exhorted them to learn the whole truth:

Meet it is that thou shouldst learn all things, as well the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, as the opinions of mortals in which there is not true belief at all. Yet nonetheless shalt thou learn these things also how, passing right through all things, one should judge the things that seem to be.

And so, like Alcmaeon, Parmenides wanted to raise man above the state of obscure knowledge so that man could reach the truth. But, whereas Alcmaeon stated that man's own struggle through an orderly method of analysis was the way to reach this truth of the deity, Parmenides claimed in the earlier section of Fragment 1 that the truth was a pure gift of the deity, that it came to men through revelation. Once more, therefore, the influence of Homer and Hesiod had been brought to bear on a later generation. Parmenides also considered the majority of men to be foolish, so that it was through men like himself that he hoped to alert the human race to the divine truth. For this philosopher the mind endowed man with thought and divine knowledge, whereas sense perception merely transmitted human appearances. But what was

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34Ibid. Frag. 1, 28-32.
the source of this thought and the procedure following it? Snell comments:

The deity introduces Parmenides to pure thought: with it he comprehends the pure Being. Alcmaeon advances--inductively, we should say--from the perception of the senses, from human knowledge, to the invisible; Parmenides receives a divine instruction to put aside as illusion all sense experience and the process of becoming which the senses apprehend. The goddess shows him no path which leads uninterruptedly from human to divine knowledge, but from the intuitive recognition of Being as such she deduces the truths concerning thought and Being, Being and non-Being, and so forth. Thus Parmenides gives us the discovery of the intelligible world as an independent entity.35

Empedocles' contribution to this discussion is quite limited, since he really offered no new ideas. His basic contention was that man's senses were insufficient to give him knowledge.36 The reason for this was that the senses were limited and easily clouded by a multitude of impressions bombarding them. Because of this, and because man saw so little in his lifetime, Empedocles claimed that man never really saw the whole. Man could not see the basic Unity lying behind everything. It seems that Empedocles agreed with Xenophanes,37 however, that the deity did see the Unity, for the deity was all experience, and therefore could grasp the whole. What then was the solution to the inadequacy of human knowledge? Empedocles thought the only way to obtain the knowledge was by dependence on the Muses. Once again this primitive idea had returned with the last of the pre-Socratics to formally discuss this problem of the distinction between human and

35 Snell, op. cit., p. 149.
36 Cf. Empedocles Frag. 2.
37 Cf. Xenophanes Frag. 24.
divine knowledge.

Prior to a study of Sophocles' thought on this subject, it might be well to conclude this survey by looking at a poet whose basic ideas on the relation between gods and men appeared again and again in the tragedies of Sophocles.

Pindar, who lived from 518 to 443 B.C., did not discuss divine and human knowledge in the scientific and philosophical terminology used by the pre-Socratics. His importance in this survey is founded on the fact that he placed his theory of human knowledge in the much larger context of man's relation to the gods. Because of this he uncovered some basic ethical principles not found in the philosophers of this period.

The classic passage, usually cited when speaking of the relation of the human to the divine, is from the sixth Nemean:

One is the race of men, one is the race of gods, and from one mother do we both derive our breath; yet a power that is wholly sundered parteth us, in that one is naught, while for the other the brazen heaven endureth as an abode unshaken forevermore. Albeit, we mortals have some likeness, either in might of mind or at least in our nature, to the immortals, although we know not by what course, whether by day, nor nor yet in the night watches, fate hath ordained that we should run.38

In commenting on this passage, C. M. Bowra states:

The distinguishing quality of the gods is, above everything, power. They can do on an enormous scale what man can do only faintly and fitfully, and much that he cannot do at all; they are assured of unerring success and satisfaction, but he knows that he is all too likely to fail. Their power is manifest everywhere, and before it he can only be humble and hope for its help. He can pray that by some god-given fortune he may for a time come near to them in the possession of gifts like their own. He is not severed from them by an absolute difference of nature; he resembles them in his essential being, which is indeed hampered by grave handicaps but can none-theless at time realize astonishing possibilities of mind and of body. 39

What this passage implied was that man's conduct toward the gods should have been regulated by the difference in their "growth." In this passage god and man had the same physis, but god was at a more advanced stage of growth. Gods were greater than men, and the man who did not accept what they sent was foolish. This moral was explicitly expressed in the eleventh Nemean where Pindar said that the reason men did not accept what the gods had ordained was that men lacked foreknowledge. He said:

As for that which cometh from Zeus, there is no clear sign in heaven that waiteth on man; but yet we embark upon bold endeavours, yearning after many exploits; for our limbs are fettered by importunate hope, while the tides of foreknowledge lie far away from our sight. In our quest of gain, it is right to pursue the due measure; but far too keen are the pangs of madness that come from unattainable longings. 40


Therefore, it was because man could not see or know what was in store for him that he strayed to and fro looking for something or trying to be someone that could not or should not be. In doing this man exceeded his "due measure." And so, Pindar exhorted mankind:

Strive not to be a Zeus;
All things are thine, should a share
of these fair boons fall to thy lot.
Mortal aims befit mortal men.41

After warning men of their limitations with regard to their nature and their foreknowledge, and after exhorting them to be satisfied with "mortal aims," Pindar did not leave the future totally uncertain for man. He provided them with a solution in two of his Paeans. The answer was one which was mentioned before—since the future was uncertain for men, they must depend on the Muses for wisdom:

And, whence the strife of the immortals arose,
of this the gods are able to prompt sage poets;
while, for mortal men, it is impossible to find it.
But, since ye maiden Muses know all things . . .
listen now!42

and

for the minds of men are blind, whosoever,

41Ibid. Isthm. 5, 13-16.
μὴ μάτεν Ζεὺς γενέσθαι πάντ' ἔχεις.
εἶ τις τοῦτων μὴρ ἑσθῆκοιτο καλῶν.
ἐναρκὴ διατόμων πρέπει.

42Ibid. Paean 6, 50-58.
καὶ πόθεν ἀθανάτων ἔρις ἐρήμως,
ταῦτα θεοῖς μὲν
πάθεις τοψθεὺς, συναρτοῦ,
βραχίοναν ἐκείνου εὐρέμεν.
ἀλλὰ περὶ γένεις γὰρ οὕτω <γε> Μοῖσι
πάντα . . . κλοπέ νυν.
without the maids of Helicon, seeketh the steep path
of them that walked it by their wisdom.\textsuperscript{43}

This discussion of Pindar, then, concludes the survey of the pre-
Sophoclean writers who made significant contributions to the discussion of
the distinction between divine and human knowledge in particular and the
relation between gods and men in general. This chapter will be concluded
by a brief look at the main ideas of these men which influenced the subse-
quent doctrine of Sophocles.

One of the first ideas discussed in this chapter was the fact that
the gods (here in the form of Muses) possessed a much more complete knowledge
of the world than men did. Homer stated this because he said that man was
the recipient of hearsay, whereas the Muses were eyewitnesses to everything.
Empedocles held basically the same doctrine founded on the limited sense
organs of men. Pindar raised the problem to a higher level, when he said
that all life was uncertain for men, who must therefore depend on the Muses
for wisdom. Certainly Sophocles' basic doctrine on the difference between
human and divine knowledge echoed much these same thoughts.

Once the poets had established this dichotomy between the human
and divine knowledge, how then was man to attain true insight? The answer
for most was \textit{revelation} from the Muses. Homer and Parmenides came right
out and said this, while Empedocles and Pindar seemed to imply it when they
stated that men were dependent on the Muses for knowledge. Although Sophocles

\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.} \textit{Paean} 7b. 13-16.
certainly said later on that men received their basic true knowledge from the gods through revelation, he added the mediator as a means to accomplish this. In some sense, Hesiod might have influenced him here, for Hesiod established himself as the mediator between the Muses and men.

The certain moral lesson that, since men were dependent on the gods, they must not, therefore, overstep their limitations, saw its first expression in the poets Solon and Theognis, and was later mentioned by Pindar who said that god was the measure of all things and not man. Sophocles concretized this same doctrine in the person of a man who thought that he was the measure of all things, i.e. Oedipus.

The final point to be mentioned is the actual essence of divine knowledge, i.e. just what made divine knowledge more perfect than human knowledge. The basic doctrine was developed by Xenophanes who said that the reason the gods' knowledge was perfect was because they experienced everything, whereas men were limited in this respect. The doctrine was developed much more fully by Heraclitus when he pointed out that the gods' knowledge was perfect because it could grasp the unity behind anything, whereas men could understand only parts of the truth at a single moment. Even more fundamental than this fact of the gods grasping unities was why they did. Heraclitus provided the answer to this, when he stated that the gods were the unities of everything. Alcmaeon agreed when he showed that men combined only sense impressions to make conjectures about the invisible. They could only partially piece together the unities which the gods knew and which they were. This will be shown to have appeared in Sophocles when he depicted Oedipus trying to work his way with pieces of information, pieces
which only confused him all the more as he made his futile attempt to fight his way out of the darkness of illusion into the light of reality.
CHAPTER III

FIFTH-CENTURY POLITICAL AND CULTURAL
INFLUENCES ON SOPHOCLES

In the previous chapter there came under discussion both the doctrine of human and divine knowledge as it was developed by the early poets and philosophers and what elements of these various positions were influential in Sophocles' thinking. These early doctrines, however, were not the only sources for Sophocles' ideas on human and divine knowledge, on man and god in general. The tragedians, and not the least of these Sophocles, were all deeply immersed in their times. The stage was a rostrum from which they could speak out for or against current ideas and practices. Ancient comedy, as exemplified in Aristophanes, was explicitly doing this, but it must not be thought that tragedy was not also taking part. Much of ancient drama could be misinterpreted if studied in isolation and considered solely as a dramatic piece and not also as a vehicle for ideas. The Greek theater like any other great theater, made abundant use of ideas, and the Athenians regarded the theater, not as entertainment, but as the supreme instrument of cultural instruction, a democratic paideia complete in itself.¹

Therefore, fifth-century tragedy should be viewed as a criticism, both positive and negative, of its times. The analysis of the Oedipus

Tyrannus in the next chapter will center around Sophocles' answer to the spirit of the times, a spirit which was questioning the traditional beliefs and culture. For a better understanding of Sophocles' criticism, it is necessary to comment on the milieu of Sophocles—Athens of the fifth century.

During the half century immediately succeeding the Persian Wars the most characteristic note of Athens was rapid growth. The city was extending its political jurisdiction and quickly becoming an empire. It was developing into the world's center of art and letters. Its economic life was growing daily more complex, while the courts and assembly were also frequented. Coupled with all of this was the transformation of the forms of government. Traditional institutions withered, while new ideas of equality bloomed, and democracy was on the rise. In other spheres, too, the validity of traditional conventions and laws was called into question. The Athenian was growing sophisticated, and it was part of his sophistication to look with a skeptical eye upon rules and customs observed by the common people. Needless to say, the religion did not escape this skeptical attitude of the new Athenian generation.

But perhaps the most important result of this abnormally rapid change was the transformation of the intellectual outlook of the Athenian. Previously interested primarily in the cosmos and in the direction and preservation of the state, he now turned his inquiries inward on himself. He became ego-centric, interested in self-development, inquisitive about the nature and validity of his own faculties, curious of ethical matters. Moreover, he began to apply to his own conduct the principles underlying the
policy of aggrandizement pursued by the state. It was in Athens that this new spirit of anthropocentrism reached its peak, for in reading the speeches of Pericles it can be seen that

the idea that man was capable of full understanding and eventual domination of his environment found its appropriate home in the city which could see no limits to its own unprecedented expansion. The splendor and power of the polis tyrannos encouraged a bold conception of anthropos tyrannos, man the master of the universe, a self-taught and self-made rule . . .

For an excellent description of this optimistic spirit so prevalent in Athens it would be well to turn to one of the most famous choral songs in all of Greek tragedy, the παλιά τα ἄστριν α ode in the Antigone:

Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man; the power that crosses the white sea, driven by the stormy south-wind, making a path under surges that threaten to engulf him; and Earth, the eldest of the gods, the immortal, the unwearyed, doth he wear, turning the soil with the offspring of horses, as the ploughs go to and fro from year to year. And the light-hearted race of birds, and the tribes of savage beasts, and the sea-brood of the deep, he snares in the meshes of his woven toil, he leads captive, man excellent in wit. And he masters by his arts the beast whose lair is in the wilds, who roams the hills; he tames the horse of shaggy mane, he puts the yoke upon its neck, he tames the tireless mountain bull. And speech, and wind-swift thought, and all the moods that mould a state, hath he taught himself; and how to flee the arrows of the rushing rain; yea, he hath resource for all; without resource he meets nothing that must come; only against Death shall he call for aid in vain; but from baffling maladies he hath devised escapes. Cunning beyond fancy's dreams is the fertile skill which brings him, now to evil, now to good.


These lines depicted the progress that man had made from his primitive ignorance to the civilized power that typified the Athens of Sophocles' day. This proud view of man's development was a fifth-century invention which was also associated with Aeschylus⁴ and Protagoras.⁵ These two versions of man's history, however, differed from the Sophoclean account in that the first two strongly emphasized the role played by the divine beings responsible for man's advances. But, in the Sophoclean version there was no mention of the gods except that Earth, "the eldest of the gods," was being worn away by man's ploughs. Here, there arose a totally secular

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⁴ Cf. Aeschylus Prometheus Bound 436-506.

⁵ Cf. Plato Protagoras 320D.
view of man's development, whereby man alone had achieved all that he had done.

Of course, it must be noted that this part of the ode did not express what Sophocles really thought, for in the concluding section of the stasimon doubts were raised which undermined the proud confidence of the opening, and the subsequent section of the play completely destroyed the possibility of a view of a human state devoid of the divine. Sophocles must have used this first section of the ode to represent a point of view current, and in intellectual circles dominant, in his time—a point of view he did not at all agree with as was shown by the resolution of the Antigone, and, as shall be seen later on, by the theme of the Oedipus Tyrannus.

With respect to the two other accounts of man's history mentioned above, it is quite clear how the Aeschylean version would agree with his traditional ways of thinking and his acknowledgement of the divine rule of things. Plato's account of the Protagorean version, however, was most likely not true to the original sophist's thought. For Protagoras was the man who, above all the other sophists, defined the new anthropomorphic viewpoint in the famous phrase "Man is the measure of all things." Whereas the pre-Socratic philosophers were interested in the cosmos and in man's relation to the divine, Protagoras was interested in man, in his ethics and his knowledge. The meaning of his famous maxim was simply this: there were no modes or levels of being. A thing either was or was not. The test of this was each man's sensation. If a man felt cold, it was cold for him, though it might not be cold for another. Hence it was possible for anyone to think what was false, for even to think nothing was a real thought if one actually
had it. Therefore, each man, as an individual man, was the measure of being, of things that were that they were, and of things that were not that they were not. A man's sense told him that all was in flux, for no sensation was ever repeated. The universe was, therefore, a great maze of interacting processes in constant transformation. It was futile to speculate about any ultimate source. The events of nature had happened of themselves. They simply were. That was all man could know.

Because of his notion of all things in flux, Protagoras was skeptical about the existence of the gods and criticized all religious traditions as primitive superstition. He made no mention of divinity or of any divine influence in human affairs, for all events fell into two classes—those due to change or nature which happened of themselves, and those due to human contrivance. But, it was this very lack of foundation in the divine that characterized the emptiness or shallowness of the Protagorean and, in general, the sophistic theory of education. By taking a closer look at the essentials of their education, it can also be seen how this theory grew out of the spirit of Periclean Athens.

As Athens changed from the old static city-state to the dynamic imperial state of Pericles, all its energies were brought into violent action and competition, both externally and internally. The rationalization of political education was only a special case of the rationalization of all life within Athens; for now, more than ever before, the end of life was achievement, success. This change was bound to affect the standards by which character was judged. Ethical qualities now fell into the background, and the emphasis was put on intellectual qualities. During the
age of the sophists the intellectual side of man came to the fore and thereby created the educational task which the sophists attempted to fulfill.
Essentially, they endeavoured to transmit the old educational tradition, which had been principally incorporated in poetry, into the language and ideology of their own rationalistic age, and, by establishing the theory and purposes of culture, they extended the influence of Ionian science to ethics and politics. In doing this they formulated a humanism based on moral and metaphysical relativism, and on religious scepticism and indifference. Werner Jaeger points out that the sophists were the first to make the modern distinction between culture and religion in ancient Greek education. In an excellent passage, which is worth quoting at length, Professor Jaeger points out that this distinction was costly, for Greek education was deeply rooted in religious faith. The rift between the two first opened in the age of the sophists, which was also the period in which the ideal of culture was first consciously formulated. Protagoras' assertion that the traditional values of life were all relative, and his resigned acceptance of the insolubility of all the enigmas of religion, were without doubt intimately connected with his high ideal of culture. Probably the conscious ideal of humanism could not have been produced by the great Greek educational tradition except at a moment when the old standards which had once meant so much to education began to be questioned. In fact, it clearly implies a reversion to the narrow basis of human life per se. Education always needs a standard; and at that period, when the traditional standards were dissolving and passing away, it chose as its standard the form of man: it became formal. . . . But it is quite as essential a feature of humanism, that, formal as it may be at any moment, it always looks forward and backward, beyond itself—backward to the rich religious and moral forces of historical tradition, as the true 'spirit' from which the intellectual concept of rationalism, empty to the point of abstraction, must derive its concrete and living content; and forward to the religious and philosophical problem of a concept of life which surrounds and protects humanity like a tender root, but also gives it back the fertile soil in which to grow. . . . Yet from the point of view of simple
historical fact, it seems to have been settled long ago that the ideal of human culture as put forward by the sophists had within it the germs of a great future, but was not itself a complete and mature product. . . . But because of the loftiness of its claims, it needed a deeper foundation, in philosophy and religion.6

Because of this lack of foundation in a ruling principle for the world and for life, the later sophists came to a conclusion that was an inevitable result of their basic positions. They saw the world not as a coherent order but as an accidental array of conflicting forces. In such a world, the law of nature was the rule of might. It was this implication of their basic position which became increasingly prominent among the later sophists at the end of the great Peloponnesian War.

This lack of a religious foundation in education combined with current rationalistic theories of ethics and politics and with the scientific teachings of the physicists to create an atmosphere in Athens in which man and his intelligence were seen as the highest values in the universe, for now man becomes the measure of all things . . . in part by dismissing or reducing in significance the non-human, semi-animate and animistic powers of the Archaic world. He begins to describe and confront the world in terms of processes that bear firmly the stamp of human ratiocinative power. Thus Thucydides rejects the unmythical in favor of rational inference and generic laws based upon human nature (see Thuc. 1.22). Man's part is seen in terms of man himself, "the human element" (to anthropoinon); and hence it will be useful for men to come to know their past, for they can hope also to understand their present. There is no place here for the intervention of the gods, for divine "envy" or wrath; man is a free and autonomous agent, able to consider his past and his future, for both

are bound together by this human element. 7

With the gods excluded from discussion, and man the measure of all things, man's attempt to understand his environment and nature, if successful, would have made him equated to the gods. For man, with the attainment of complete understanding, would have been more than the equal of the gods; for, if the scientific explanation of the universe made the concept of divine power unnecessary or demonstrably false, man would have been revealed as the creator of the gods. This belief eventually led to the extreme theory of Critias, the guiding spirit of the Thirty Tyrants, which said that the gods were an invention "by a man of wisdom and intelligence whose object was to stabilize society by imposing on erring human beings an inescapable superior and a supreme fear of superhuman vision and retribution." 8 But even before Critias wrote these words which expressed the extreme doctrine of the intellectual revolution, the confidence of its early period in the idea of man in a universe he could fully understand and perhaps eventually destroy had vanished. These hopes began to collapse at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War--the eclipse of Athenian power. It was during this period that criticism of oracles was particularly common. False oracles were produced in large quantities, and the oracle-monger became a figure for the comic stage. Human foresight and calculation were meant to replace them, but the war and all that went with it could be seen as a mockery of any human efforts to foresee the turn of events.

7 Charles P. Segal, "Nature and the World of Man in Greek Literature," Arion, II (Spring, 1963), 30.
8 Knox, op. cit., p. 163.
This concludes, then, the brief discussion of the spirit of the fifth-century Athens which Sophocles knew—a spirit of intellectual progress which Sophocles criticized in his most famous play—the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Sophocles worked this spirit into the dramatic framework of his play, a framework which showed this spirit to be wrong from the start. It was as if the gods were mocking Oedipus; they watched the critical intelligence work its way through to the absolutely clear vision, to find out that the prophecy which was thought to have been false had been fulfilled all the time. The man who rejected prophecy was the living demonstration of its truth: the rationalist at his most intelligent and courageous peak, the unconscious proof of divine knowledge.

But does this mean that in this play Sophocles was attacking man’s intellect? that he was denying the validity of it? On this point Richmond Hathorn says:

That Sophocles was opposed to certain intellectual tendencies of his time, that he set himself against the trend toward a facile and narrow rationalism: these have become critical commonplace. . . . No one has ever consistently argued for deliberately hampering the activity of reason, if only because he could not allow his own reason to be hampered in defense of his position; no thinker has ever thought that human reason should not be permitted to go as far as it can: there have simply been many to add that, having gone so far, it must not rest in the unreasonable conclusion that it has gone all the way, or that, having gone farther than it can, it must not conclude that it is any longer reasonable. Sophocles in the *Oedipus* surely attacks intellectual pride; he does not attack the intellect as such.\(^9\)

Just how Sophocles depicted the abilities and deficiencies of man's intellect will be discussed in the next chapter. What is important to note, however, in this chapter is that Sophocles was writing in the full flower of fifth-century humanism. Living in a rationally conscious, man-centered age, they [Sophocles and Euripides] raise the question of how man as controller stands in relation to what he does not or cannot control, how much he dares to control, and finally whether he can control himself. [For Sophocles] The moral questions are raised now in terms of man's relation to himself, with all the mysteries and paradoxes of his existence. Man is the 'measure,' but he must measure himself against the non-human to discover his true humanity.  

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10 Segal, op. cit., pp. 35-36.
CHAPTER IV

THE OEDIPUS TYRANNUS: A DIALECTIC BETWEEN HUMAN AND DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

Prior to the consideration of the dialectic of Sophocles' most famous play, it might be good to take a look at Oedipus' character to see how he exemplified the fifth-century spirit which has been discussed in the previous chapter. Oedipus, in his character and his mode of action, was a symbolic representation of Periclean Athens.

The optimistic concept of man was expressed very poignantly in the πολλὰ ἐξ αὐτῶν ode of the Antigone. This ode, as mentioned above, did not portray what Sophocles himself believed. The concluding words of the stasimon (369-75) raise doubts which undermined the proud confidence of the opening, and the subsequent events of the play completely shattered the possibility of a secular view of the human condition. The lines prior to this section did, however, represent a point of view current, and in intellectual circles probably dominant, in Sophocles' time. And, it was on these lines that Oedipus' character was based. In comparing the stasimon and the character of Oedipus, Bernard M. W. Knox says:

These lines of the Antigone describe the rise to power of anthropos tyrannos: self-taught, unaided, he seizes control of his environment; by intelligence and technique he wins mastery over the elements and the animals. The language of the Oedipus Tyrannus associates the hero of the play with this triumphant progress of man. Oedipus is compared not only to the city which man has created with his
"attitudes that enable him to live in communities" but also to man the conqueror and inventor, with all the achievements which have raised him to the level of civilization and made him tyrannos to the world. Three of the most striking images of the play, for example, are drawn from the first three items of the catalogue of human conquests in the Antigone stasimon.¹

The three images which Knox mentions are of Oedipus metaphorically presented as helmsman, ploughman, and hunter. Each of these three images will now be discussed. Oedipus as helmsman was appropriate in as much as he was the tyrannos who guided the ship of state. In a number of places, the state was compared to a ship (Cf. O.T. lines 4-5, 22-24), and Oedipus as its helmsman (Cf. O.T. 420ff., 694-96, 922-23).

The second image, that of the ploughman, was always connected with Oedipus' birth and begetting. Oedipus referred to himself and his relationship to Laius and Jocasta in terms of this metaphor both before (though unknowingly here) and after his discovery of who he was (Cf. O.T. 259-60, 1256-57, 1485, 1497-98).

The most important image for the purpose of this thesis is the third and final one, that of Oedipus as hunter, for this image sprung most naturally from the dominant note of the play—a search. Both Oedipus and Creon referred to the initial search for the murderer in hunting terms (Cf. O.T. 108-11, 221). In the ode beginning at line 474 the unsuspected truth was implied—that Oedipus was both the tracker and the wild bull, both the hunter and the hunted. After the terrible discovery, the messenger said that Oedipus "wandered" or "ranged about," using the same word (φοράεται).

¹Knox, op. cit., p. 110.
which in the ode had described the movements of the hunted bull. Finally, Oedipus, near the end of the play, saw the truth and asked to be allowed to live among the wild beasts in the mountains (Cf. O.T. 1451).

In conclusion Knox has this to say about the significance of these three images:

The imagery thus links Oedipus with the three basic steps in the progress of humanity described in the Antigone stasimon, the conquest of the sea, the soil, and the animals. Oedipus is figuratively presented as helmsman, ploughman, and hunter. All three images add to the stature of Oedipus, who begins to appear as the symbolic representative not only of the tyrannic energy and legal creativity of Athens but also of mankind as a whole in its difficult progress towards mastery over nature.²

Upon consideration of another aspect of the language of this play, it can be seen that Oedipus symbolized the new critical and inventive spirit that was typical of fifth-century Athens. The action of the tragedy, a search for truth pursued to the bitter end without fear of the consequences, mirrored the intellectual, scientific quest of the age. Oedipus, time and again, used words typical of the scientific spirit and its dedication to the truth, whatever the cost. At the point where he neared the fatal truth about himself, Oedipus was heard to say:

I cannot yield my right to know the truth.³

²Ibid. 116.
³Sophocles The Oedipus Tyrannus 1065, ed. and trans. J. T. Sheppard (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1920), pp. 66-67. All further citations from this play will be from this text and translation.
Break what break will! My will shall be to see
My origin however mean!  

and finally

Alas! So it has come, the thing I dread to tell.
The thing I dread to hear. Yet I must hear it.

Much more could be said of the vocabulary of the play concerning scientific searching. Knox, in his *Oedipus at Thebes*, has done such an analysis. His basic theory is summed up as follows:

The attitude and activity of Oedipus are images of the critical spirit and the great intellectual achievements of a generation of sophists, scientists, and philosophers. Oedipus investigates, examines, questions, infers; he uses intelligence, mind, thought; he knows, finds, reveals, makes clear, demonstrates, he learns and teaches; and his relationship to his fellow men is that of liberator and savior. The Greek words to which the items of this list correspond bulk large in the vocabulary of the play; they are the words which sum up the spirit and serve the purpose of the new scientific attitude and activity.

One final aspect of the play deserves mention here, for it will serve as an introduction to the analysis of the dramatic action. As mentioned before, this play centered around a search for truth, a search highlighted all the more by the enormous amount of questions contained in the dialogue. An interesting study of this aspect of the play has been done by John P. Carroll, S.J. He points out that the number of questions in this

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4Ibid. 1076-77.

5Ibid. 1169-70.

6Knox, op. cit., p. 117.

play far exceeded that of any other extant Greek tragedy. They served as the bases for the three searches in the play. The play began with the search for the cause of the plague afflicting Thebes. The attention of the actors, however, was soon directed away from this to a search for the murderer of the former king. Finally, there came the investigation to determine who were Oedipus’ parents. The result of this search ultimately revealed who Oedipus was. It is because of these interlocking searches and the illusions contained therein that a statement such as the following lacks conviction as a critical estimate of the play:

Neither the oracle first given him [Oedipus] at Delphi, nor the plain speech of Teiresias, nor the news of the Corinthian messenger, nor the pleadings of Jocasta, are sufficient to suggest the real truth to his mind. Such profundity of blindness is dramatically impossible. 8

This type of criticism might be valid after a surface reading of the play; but, if the reader were to begin his study of the play with a knowledge of the play’s background as previously outlined, he would soon see that the events of the play attempted to portray one man’s struggle to reach the truth—a struggle necessarily blocked by the illusions surrounding man’s limited capabilities for understanding. Keeping in mind, then, this basic notion of the limitation of human understanding, there follows the analysis of the action of the play to determine how this limitation affected the destiny of Oedipus.

The first section of the play to be analyzed—Oedipus’ encounter with the Theban citizens—contained two parts: the dialogue of the prologos

(1-150) and the choral ode of the parados (151-215). The prologos set the
stage for the action of the play and provided the first glimpse of the char-
acter of Oedipus. The first impression of the king was one of self-confi-
dence. Lines 6-8 not only revealed this but also his mistrust of the
abilities of others:

Whereof I would not hear the tale, my children,
From other lips than yours. Look: I am here,
I, whom men call 'the All-Famous Oedipus!'  

The priest told Oedipus of their plight, of the plague that was ravaging
the area. Here the first search was proposed—to find the cause of the
plague. It was in the priest's speech, too, that Oedipus' relation to the
gods was first mentioned. The people did not deem him a god, but rather

Of human kind we judge you first in the common accident
Of fate; in the traffic of the gods with man, greatest
of men.  

The lines following these two provided the first reference to Oedipus' in-
telligence, the fact that he had solved the Sphinx's riddle through his own
wit with the help of the gods. Mindful of this the suppliants begged their
king to find succour for them either through a revelation of a god or the
power of man. Here, then, were the basic elements of the problem of know-
ledge: did man know only with the help of the gods or could he arrive at the
truth independently from them? The people thought that both were necessary.

9 O.T., op. cit., 6-8.

10 Ibid., 33-34.
Oedipus did not commit himself one way or the other. He would do so later on.

At the entrance of Creon, whom Oedipus had sent to Delphi to learn the cause of the plague, Oedipus expressed great eagerness for undertaking the initial search. When the priest conjectured that Creon, seen in the distance wearing laurels, was bringing comforting news, Oedipus was not satisfied. For him conjecture was not enough. He shouted out:

He is in earshot. We'll not think, but know.\(^1\)

Oedipus wanted to know the news right away and he would have it only by hearing it directly from the mouth of his brother-in-law. What Oedipus heard changed the object of his search, for now the god at Delphi had revealed the cause of the plague—the murderers of Laius still dwelt in the region of Thebes. The significant thing to note in this section is the use of the two plurals: "αὐτούντας" in line 107 and "γιοτας" in line 122. Creon naturally assumed that there had been a number of robbers who murdered the former king. In line 124 Oedipus referred to a single robber, but the difference in number was not important for the action of the play at this time. Its significance would remain in the background until the middle of the play where it would play a great part in leading Oedipus to further illusions and false assumptions. Oedipus ended this prologue by vowing to pursue the murderer until he was apprehended.

On the surface this section portrayed an intelligent, quick-thinking king. Oedipus appeared to be on top of the situation. His mental blindness

\(^1\)Ibid. 84.
was not explicitly evident. Implicitly, though, the lines contained everything that would rise to the surface at the end. The audience knew this through the technique of dramatic irony. One author discusses one of the most obvious examples, when he says:

One might instance the well-known words of Oedipus, when he learns that the murderer of Laius must be tracked down. 'I'll drive this evil out,' he cries, 'since he that slew the king might perchance, by the like hand, strike at me.' The audience shudders: for it is forcibly reminded of the mental blindness of Oedipus. Language, the full significance of which is not perceived by the speaker, was used by Sophocles (in a more masterly manner than by any other dramatist) to bring home to us the blindness of man.12

The audience, then, was aware that Oedipus' statements carried more meaning than he suspected. They were warned that Oedipus might not be as intelligent and cognizant of the real situation as he appeared to be in the opening events of the play. Their suspicions gradually would be justified in the succeeding episodes.

The parados (151-215) was not too relevant to the theme of the play—the search in terms of human and divine knowledge. The chorus had been in the wings during the prologos and so had not heard the news from Delphi. Therefore, they commented upon the plague itself and its effects rather than on the cause, which had not as yet been revealed to them. The main effect of this ode was to show the Theban elders' complete dependence on the gods for deliverance from the evil disease. They exemplified the traditional religion, for there was no talk of any man attempting to solve this problem. Their repeated calls for aid from the gods acted as a bridge to the next

section, which contained the first glimpse of Teiresias, the seer of divine knowledge.

The second major section of the play consisted of the first epeisodion (216-462) and the first stasimon (463-512). It began with the solemn declaration of Oedipus to the citizens of Thebes, in which he called down curses upon any and all who in any way sheltered the murderer. Again, in this section he referred to a single murderer, though in line 247 he allowed for the possibility of several. It was not until line 308, in his opening address to Teiresias, that Oedipus definitely settled on one possibility—that there had been a number of slayers.

The entrance of Teiresias brought the first direct confrontation of human and divine knowledge in the persons of Oedipus and Teiresias, respectively. The chorus introduced Teiresias:

See! They bring
The sacred prophet hither, in whose soul,
As in no other mortal's, liveth truth.  

Oedipus continued by addressing Teiresias with words expressing great respect for his exceptional gift of discerning the unspeakable, the secrets of heaven and the low things of earth. At this moment the extreme self-confidence of Oedipus receded behind the expression of his and the city's dependence upon this prophet of the gods. The mood would soon change.

Teiresias' first words were:

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Ah me! It is but sorrow to be wise
When wisdom profits not. 14

Here Teiresias was speaking of his own terrible knowledge; but this proverb also applied tragically to Oedipus, whose wisdom profited not. This was the guiding thought throughout this scene—true wisdom lay in the knowledge of oneself, something Oedipus lacked at that time. And would Teiresias give Oedipus that knowledge of himself? No, and herein lay the irony of the situation. Even though Teiresias realized that Oedipus must have self-knowledge, he was certain that, if he were to reveal it to the king, Oedipus would not accept this divine revelation as absolute. Given the nature of human knowledge, this revelation of divine knowledge would have only driven Oedipus on to further investigations which inevitably would have led to the tragic truth with much more tragic results. Teiresias had seen this and therefore refused to speak, for

Though I hide all in silence, all must come. 15

Therefore, the inevitability of divine knowledge was clearly shown—if it would necessarily come true, there was no need for man to confuse the issue and make the result more tragic by the uncertain wanderings of human investigation.

It was at this point that the first really evident illusion came to the forefront. Oedipus expressed it himself:

14Ibid. 316-17.
φονεύοντα μη τελη

15Ibid. 341.
ηιίζει γάρ αυτά, καν έγις σοι γνώσθησα.
Aye, so I will—speak out my wrath, and spare
No jot of all I see.16

These words are significant, for Oedipus really did not know with certainty any of the things he was about to declare. And why? Because he was being overcome with anger and impatience and was, therefore, beginning to suspect Teiresias of having had a hand in the death of Laius (346-48) and of having been bribed by Creon, who wished to overthrow Oedipus (385-86). The illusion, in a vague form, had been with him for some time. But, what had been a mere possibility in his first inquiries (124-25) had now taken on a definite shape and become an obsession. This obsession had an immediate effect. In line 362 Teiresias for the second time accused Oedipus of being the defiler of the land. The king's reaction was to warn Teiresias that he should not say this kind of thing twice. When the exact truth was revealed to him, the wise Oedipus was too angry to grasp it. C. M. Bowra points out that, when Oedipus indulges his angry temper, he pays for it with the loss of judgement and decency. But the intellectual aspects of the struggle are more important than the moral. For the play what counts is that Oedipus' tendency to anger prevents him from seeing the truth, even when it is told him and induces a state of illusion in which he lives until reality is forced upon him.17

Oedipus' tendency to be blinded by anger explained his slowness to see the truth and the appalling horror which he felt when at last he learned it. But this was not the only reason; for Oedipus was also a man of action,

16Ibid. 345-46.
not given to prolonged thinking. He accepted facts as he heard them; and, in this scene his illusion was helped along by a small fact lurking in the background—the common belief that Laius had been killed by a number of robbers. Again, not only Oedipus, but all of the Thebans had accepted this fact and had never thought to question it in terms of the oracle which had said Laius would be killed by his son. One of the causes of man's illusion was the too easy acceptance of false facts out of a desire to arrive at the truth more swiftly. Here the fact of several robbers remained in the back of Oedipus' mind and prevented him from suspecting himself as the true murderer.

Teiresias had now charged Oedipus with the murder. The king's reply was a personal accusation. The following scene was a confrontation between the capacities of the two men for knowledge. When Teiresias claimed that there was strength in truth, Oedipus shouted out:

'Tis strong enough for all, but not for thee. Blind eyes, blind ears, blind heart, thou hast it not.  
Oedipus denied that the divine seer had true knowledge, for Teiresias had been of no help when the Sphinx had been threatening Thebes. What had earlier been implicit had now become explicit—Oedipus' self-confident pride in his own wisdom—for the man who sets out on his new task by sending first for the venerable seer (287ff) is not lacking in pious reverence; but all we see of him in the play shows the unrestrained pride in his own intellectual achievements. No seer found the solution, this is Oedipus' boast; no bird, no god revealed it to

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him; he, 'the utterly ignorant,' had to come, and to hit the mark by
his own wit; (395ff). Pride and self-confidence induce Oedipus
to despise prophecy, and to feel almost superior to the gods. 19

The chorus intervened at 404 in an attempt to get the two disputants to cease
their quarrelling and to once again take up the search commanded by the gods.
But it was too late; the damage had been done. Teiresias then began his final
accusation in terms of physical and mental blindness. W. C. Greene shows how
these accusations followed from those by Oedipus. He says:

After the blunt accusation of Teiresias that Oedipus is the
murderer of Laius, his anger turns into personal feeling;
past achievement and pride of intellect in having foiled the
Sphinx blind him to the loyalty and the superior knowledge
of the seer. Oedipus is wrong, and the tragedy still lies in
the ironical situation, the contrast between the semblance
and the truth (between δεικτής and άληθής). Oedipus is
saying the very opposite of what he would say if he knew the
truth. The revelation of Teiresias has been forced from him by
the anger of Oedipus; and Oedipus in turn will not believe Tei-
resias because he thinks the accusation comes merely from the
anger of Teiresias. Blind Teiresias, however, sees the truth,
while seeing Oedipus is blind to it; yet he too shall soon be
blind—-and then shall see (369-75; 412-19; 454ff). 20

Teiresias' final words were important for another reason, too; for
they introduced another fact which would take on more meaning for Oedipus
in his future encounter with the Corinthian messenger. In line 415 Teiresias
asked Oedipus if he knew from what stock he was. Oedipus did not at once
grasp the significance of this question but went on to accuse Teiresias of
being a fool. Teiresias replied:

19 Ehrenberg, op. cit., p. 68.

20 William C. Greene, Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought
Such as thou say'st I am; for thee a fool,
But for thy parents that begat thee, wise. 21

Oedipus was taken aback at the mention of his parents but strangely did not pursue the point; for he thought, however falsely, that he was from Corinthian royalty by birth. This fact, along with that of the band of robbers, was the second implanted seed which would blossom forth later on into new illusions. Diller points out that these two facts were tied in with the two questions whose answers would eventually be the same: Oedipus. He says:

This limitation of human knowledge, of not being able to grasp the unity behind diverse facts and questions, would play its role again.

Teiresias left the stage knowing that Oedipus was polluted, accursed, and doomed. Oedipus, on the other hand, lived in his illusory world and failed to grasp the significance of the prophet's words. This was the peculiar irony of human illusion. Man thought he knew the truth but he was so far from it that he could not see it when it came. This was evident in the scene where

21 O.T., op. cit., 435-36.
Sophocles shows the two sides of the conflict. The old seer can do nothing to remedy a hopeless situation. He tells the truth, but makes no effect. The man, anxious to do his best, quite fails to understand what is said, and no solution is reached. The gods pursue their plans undeterred, and Oedipus finds his destiny.\textsuperscript{23}

The first stasimon (463–512) began with the question "who could be the murderer?" rather than "was it Oedipus?" The reason the chorus returned to the original problem established by Apollo was not that they were unmoved by the last speeches of Teiresias, but that they had not understood them. They were indeed vaguely horrified by the dreadful words they had just heard, but their inability to understand naturally made them more ready to assume that the prophet had been mistaken in what they had supposed to be the main, the only intelligible point—the accusation of murder. They expressed this in their comments on Teiresias' charges, where they exclaimed:

I cannot deny. I cannot approve. I know not what to say. I brood and waver. I know not the truth of the day or the morrow.\textsuperscript{24}

This statement was more prophetic of the limitations of human knowledge than the chorus realized at that time. Their failure at this point was due to their doubting that Teiresias was a true representative of the gods. The chorus realized that

\textit{nay, Zeus and Apollo indeed are keen of thought, and know the things of the earth; but that mortal seer wins knowledge above mine, of this there can be no sure test; though}

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, p. 204.}

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{O.T., op. cit., 485–86.}

\begin{verbatim}
ὅτι λέει δ' ἀπορῶ,
πέραι δ' ἐλπίσων, οὔτ' ἐνΘά' ὄρῳ οὔτ' ὀπίσω.
\end{verbatim}
a man may be wiser, I know, than his fellow.25

They acknowledged the infallibility of divine knowledge but they placed Teiresias between that knowledge and human knowledge. This misconception caused the illusion surrounding the comments of the chorus.

The second epeisodion (513-863) contained two major encounters—those between Oedipus and Creon (513-697) and between Oedipus and Jocasta (698-863). The entrance of Creon at 513 brought a definite lull in the progress of the play's action. The chief effect of this encounter between Oedipus and Creon was to contrast a man confident in his illusory knowledge with one aware of the insufficiencies of his imperfect knowledge.

Somewhat unsure of themselves after witnessing the previous scene, the chorus, having understood that Oedipus' charges against Creon had come under stress of anger, were not able to tell Creon the meaning of the charges, for

I know not. What my masters do, I see not.26

They admitted their lack of understanding but they unwisely turned to Oedipus, who was still full of anger, for an explanation. The prudence and moderation of the king's brother-in-law then came forward. He knew that Oedipus suspected him of an attempt to seize the throne but he did not know on what grounds he was suspected. In his patient effort to free Oedipus


26 Ibid. 530.
from this false illusion, Creon first introduced a frame of mind which would
make Oedipus consent to listen. His first attempts appeared in the section
543-554:

This right I bid thee do. As thou has spoken,
So hear me. Then, when thou hast knowledge, judge. 27

and

Nay, if you think unreasoned stubbornness
A thing to value, 'tis an evil thought. 28

In this section Oedipus' delusion was contrasted with the good sense of Creon
whom Oedipus charged with a lack of φρόνησις. This was a repetition of
the main motif of the Teiresias scene. In the following section (555-73)
the refusal of Creon to speak without knowledge was contrasted with the rash
assumptions of Oedipus, the wise man who prided himself on leaving no clue
unconsidered. Here Creon superbly manifested the Socratic ideal of the truly
wise man. In answer to Oedipus' query about the failure of Teiresias to
tell his story at the time of the actual murder, Creon replied:

I know not. Where I am not wise, I speak not. 29

And, two lines later, he said:

... If I know I'll not deny. 30

27Ibid. 543-44.
28Ibid. 549-50.
29Ibid. 569.
30Ibid. 571.
Creon's long speech (583-615) followed. It was a dramatic appeal for epóνης, not merely an ingenious defense. What was even more important was that Creon demanded, as proof of his position, that Oedipus consult the oracle. Creon knew his knowledge was limited and that what little knowledge he did possess was ultimately grounded on the divine knowledge proclaimed at Delphi.

Before Oedipus again took up his dialogue with Creon, the chorus broke in to express what the audience had felt throughout Creon's speech:

... Hot thoughts are dangerous! 31

Oedipus ignored this appeal to put off rash judgment and determined that Creon must die. Jocasta then appeared on the scene and attempted, along with the chorus, to stop this argument so that the important matter at hand, the search, could be taken up once again. She would be successful in this in the next confrontation, the one that would bring Oedipus to the brink of the awful truth.

The next section (698-910) contained the encounter between Oedipus and Jocasta (698-862) and the choral ode in the second stasimon (863-910).

By intervening at this point of the play, Jocasta was able to calm Oedipus and to relieve him of his unwarranted suspicions, which had continued to cloud the main issue of the play for the previous 400 lines or so. But, in ridding Oedipus of this illusion, Jocasta was the cause of an even greater and more terrible one. This illusion was brought to light in the following way.

31 Ibid. 617.

... φρονεῖν γὰρ οἷς τὰ κέιτις οὐκ ἄρα γεῖται.
In order to show Oedipus that he could not be the murderer of the king, Jocasta told him the oracle which had said that Laius was to have been killed by his son. She revealed her basic uncertainty about oracles, when she said:

An oracle once came to Laius—I'll not say
It came from Phoebus, but from his ministers— 32

The fact that the divine revelation came through mortal ministers upset Jocasta. After relating the oracle, Jocasta said that

Now, the king, strangers, robbers murdered him,
So runs a report, at a place where three roads meet. 33

Therefore, the oracle about Laius had been shown to be not correct, for he had not been killed by his son. At this point she told Oedipus not to believe the seers, for the god himself would bring to light whatever he thought was necessary. How true this was, and how much more easy it would have been to endure if only Jocasta and Oedipus had realized how truth was revealed.

The mention of the three roads, however, conjured up doubts in Oedipus about his innocence (726-27). For, after hearing a description of Laius and his retinue, Oedipus told Jocasta of an oracle which he had received, and how, while fleeing his parents in Corinth, he had happened to kill a man at a place where three roads met. Yet, Oedipus still passed over a very important fact; for, from the time that Jocasta first mentioned the

32 Ibid. 711-12.

33 Ibid. 715-16.
three roads in 716 until Oedipus answered in 726, Jocasta had been talking about Laius' son whom the oracle had foretold would kill his father. Because of the prophecy, the child's ankles had been pierced, and he had been cast out to die on barren hills. This mention of pierced ankles might well have reminded Oedipus of his own pierced ankles which, as he would say later on (1033), were an old source of shame to him. Yet he failed to take note of this or to suspect that he might not only be the murderer of Laius but also his son. Perhaps, he might have drawn a full conclusion from Jocasta's words, but he seized on one point only—the mention of the crossroads. This was characteristic of Oedipus. Sophocles showed that Oedipus could not grasp the truth all at once, if he were to insist on discovering it with his own limited power of understanding. With this new clue of the crossroads, then, Oedipus abandoned his suspicions about the corruption of Teiresias and Creon. He, along with Jocasta, began to suspect that he might truly be the murderer of Laius; but, there was still no thought of parricide and incest. From 764 onwards it is evident that Jocasta feared the coming of the lone survivor of the murder for she thought he would assert the guilt of Oedipus. After 813 she not only feared but knew this fact. But, there was only the suspicion that Oedipus was the regicide, not the parricide. Oedipus thought this way, too, in 744-45. In 825 Oedipus still believed that, even if he had killed Laius and must leave Thebes, there still was a chance of avoiding the greater pollution of parricide and incest. These two crimes would come to the surface and be united in one man in the remaining encounters.
Once Oedipus had dispelled the earlier illusion of corruption, he sought to erase the suspicion of murder by clinging to a single fact which now introduced an even greater illusion. It had been said that Laius had been killed by several robbers rather than by just one. When this information first came to light back in 107 and 122, Oedipus had not spoken of it as too relevant, though he had accepted it as true. But now, with the added clue of the three roads, Oedipus latched on to the report of the sole survivor and began to fight against the irresistible truth which was being forced upon him by the gods, who alone saw it in all its clarity. With regard to the sole survivor of the murder, Oedipus said to Jocasta:

You said this was his tale, that robbers slew the King, Robbers. If he confirm it, if he speak Of numbers still, it was not I, not I, That slew. One man is not a company. But if he names one lonely wayfarer, Then sways the deed to me, and all is true. 34

In support of this Oedipus had recently heard Jocasta's use of the plural "robbers" in 716, and she again asserted in 850 that this had been so and that the whole city had known it at the time. Against the rest of the evidence perhaps this carried little real weight, but Oedipus had put great trust in it. For the moment he seemed to think that the surviving witness would prove him innocent. He demanded to see him. This illusion eventually

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34 Ibid. 342-47.
would lead to his downfall.

Earlier, in discussing the encounter between Oedipus and Teiresias, Diller pointed out the two questions facing Oedipus—of the murderer and of his origin—and that the answers would eventually be the same. Concerning this point in this encounter, Diller states:

Noch diichter stehen zwei Fragen vor der Lösung durch einer Antwort in der Szene zwischen Lokaste und Ödipus... Nun ist er ganz dicht daran, sich für den Mörder des Laios zu halten, aber der Gedanke, das Orakel des Laios und sein eigenes unter einer Lösung zusammenzufassen und damit die ganze Wahrheit auf einmal in der Hand zu halten, kommt ihm nicht. Nein, wenn er als Mörder des Laios aus Theben verbannt wird, ist er ganz heimatlos: denn nach Korinth darf er nicht zurückkehren, weil sich sonst das Orakel an ihm erfüllen würde. Sucht Ödipus so das tatsächlich Geschehene als schlimme Möglichkeit an ganz anderer Stelle, so fasst Lokaste, noch paradoxer, die Wirklichkeit des Geschehens als Garantie gegen die Möglichkeit des gottverheissenen Geschehens auf: auch wenn durch die Aussage des Letzen Zeugen des Laios-Mordes ein Verdacht auf Ödipus fallen solte, so hätte jedenfalls das Laios-Orakel nicht recht behalten: denn auch dann wäre Laios nicht von seinem Sohn, sondern von einem Fremden getötet worden. 35

Jocasta concluded that the oracles and Teiresias had lied. Here isolated thinking had reached its highpoint. Jocasta and Oedipus speak every time from their whole beings; each keeps the secret dark because he does not know the secret. Each knows only what he knows. Thus the argument becomes more a revelation of character than a discussion of an idea. Both characters aim at a perfect honesty. Yet each is so isolated within the limits of his own knowledge that only so much of the central secret of the story emerges as serves to pique Oedipus further and build the ever-increasing suspense. 36

In this fourth encounter, then, the emphasis switched from the


36Whitman, op. cit., pp. 136-137.
illusion of suspicion of Teiresias and Creon to one of belief in the fact which might serve as the only hope for Oedipus’ innocence. This hope also led Oedipus, and especially Jocasta, to doubt the oracles they had received in the past. Led on by their false conclusions, they saw nothing but incongruities in the oracles. Bowra explained that

Oedipus is doubtful about oracles because his life has been so shaped that he does not know of his parricide and incest, Jocasta because the child who should have perished on Cithaeron has lived to kill his father. This unnatural situation has lasted because of the ignorance which surrounds those who are most concerned with it. This drives Oedipus and Jocasta to a scepticism which is alien to their real natures and would not be entertained by them if they did not live in a false world. Just as they do not know who and what they are, so they do not understand the truth of oracles. Their doubts are another sign of their severance from the gods and from the right way of life.37

Therefore, the situation just witnessed was really fraught with danger, and the chorus in the second stasimon (863-910) understood something of what it meant. In this ode the chorus warned Oedipus and Jocasta that they were on the brink of making religion meaningless. The chorus wanted to reassure the audience of the truth of traditional worship, of the equating of the oracles with reality. They were beginning to see that divine knowledge must take precedence over human knowledge, if man were to avoid insolence in deed and word. Knox states the significance of this ode in relation to what has gone before:

Here are two oracles, both the same, both unfulfilled: the same terrible destiny was predicted for Jocasta’s son, who is dead, and for Oedipus, who has avoided it. One thing is clear to Jocasta. Whoever turns out to be Laius’ murderer, the oracles

37Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, p. 206.
are wrong. "From this day forward, I would not, for all prophecy can say, turn my head this way or that." If the equation of the oracles with reality is a false equation, then religion is meaningless. Neither Jocasta nor Oedipus can allow the possibility that the oracles are right, and they accept the consequences, as they proceed to make clear. But the chorus cannot, and it now abandons Oedipus the calculator and turns instead to those "high-footed laws, which are the children of Olympus and not a creation of mortal man." It calls on Zeus to fulfill the oracles. "If these things do not coincide," ἄρμόσει, if the oracles do not equal reality, then "the divine order is overthrown," ἐρρεῖν τὰ θεῖα. The situation and future of two individuals become a test of divine power: if they are right, sings the chorus, "why reverence Apollo's Delphi, the center of the world? Why join the choral dance?"

Oedipus' scepticism of oracles was greatly heightened at the start of the fifth encounter in the third episodion (911-1085)—his meeting with the Corinthian messenger. The scene opened with Jocasta praying to the gods to find a remedy for the evil that had shaken her husband. Though she could no longer believe in human seers, she had never ceased to revere the gods; and now she turned to them for help. As if in answer to those prayers, a messenger from Corinth came seeking Oedipus, and the Greek of his opening lines were full of the irony of his arrival:

Can you direct me, strangers, to the house
Of Oedipus, your Master. Better still,
Perchance you know where I may find the King?


Knox says that

these violent puns, suggesting a fantastic conjugation of the verb "to know where" formed from the name of the hero who, as Teiresias told him, does not know where he is--this is the ironic laughter of the gods whom Oedipus "excludes" in his search for the truth. They watch the critical intelligence work its way laboriously and courageously through to the absolutely clear vision which, once found, it cannot bear to see. Their presence is manifested in this intrusive ironic pattern in the language of the characters, which is a riddling reminder that there is a standard beyond man by which Oedipus is measured.40

The messenger announced to Jocasta that Polybus, king of Corinth, was dead, and that Oedipus was to be made king. Elated with the news that Polybus had not died at the hand of his son, Oedipus, Jocasta once again denied the oracles (946-49). Upon hearing the same news Oedipus followed suit and questioned all forms of prophecy (964-67). Jocasta then reached the height of her confidence. She claimed that Luck governed all human affairs, that a random life was best, because

There's no foreknowledge, and no providence.41

Jocasta here spoke more truthfully than she realized. Her only mistake was to replace man's lack of foresight with Luck rather than with the foreknowledge of the gods.

Polybus was dead; but Oedipus still feared. His mother, Merope, lived on to haunt him, for it had also been foretold to Oedipus that he would espouse his own mother (995). To alleviate Oedipus from these fears, the

40 Knox, Oedipus at Thebes, p. 184.

41 ο.τ., op. cit., 978.
messenger rattled off a series of facts which now led Oedipus to another illusion. He told Oedipus that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents (1017), that Polybus had received Oedipus as a gift from his own hands (1022), that he himself had found Oedipus in the hills (1026) and had loosed Oedipus' ankles which had been pinned together (1034), and finally, that he had not really found him but that a shepherd of the household of Laius had given Oedipus to him (1040, 42, 44). After hearing all of this information, Oedipus once again changed the object of his search from "who was the murderer?" to "what was my origin?"

All this, too, had an effect on Jocasta. At 1032 she knew that Oedipus was her son. But until 1042 she struggled against the realization of the knowledge. Now, at 1042, when the messenger revealed that the other shepherd had been a member of Laius' household, Jocasta knew the worst. But she still attempted to spare Oedipus the misery of that knowledge. Oedipus would not be stopped:

I cannot yield my right to know the truth. 42

Jocasta rushed off, never to return. Oedipus thought she had done so because she feared her husband would prove to be of peasant blood. This thinking of Oedipus resulted from his ignorance of Jocasta's mentioning back in 917-19 of the abandoning of Laius' mutilated son in the hills. Oedipus just did not avert to the fact that he could have come from the royalty of Laius' household but instead he assumed that he was of low birth. Once again an

42Ibid., loc. cit., 1065.
illusion dominated him as he was left alone to solve the question of his origin. But what about the question of the murderer? Diller once again discusses the relationship of these two questions. He says:

Aus den Aussagen des Korinther wird Òdipus und Iokaste klar, dass Polubus nicht der Vater des Òdipus war, und Iokaste erkennt darüber hinaus mit furchtbarer Deutlichkeit, wessen Sohn Òdipus in Wahrheit ist. Die Erkenntnis treibt sie in den Tod. Òdipus lässt sie gehen. Er hat noch nicht alles durchschaut, sieht aber, dass er jetzt der Antwort auf die Frage nach seiner Abkunft ganz nahe ist. Das erfüllt ihn mit einer Gehobenheit, hinter der die doch in keiner Weise beseitigte Furcht, der Mörder des Laios zu sein, ganz zurücktritt. Noch einmal sondert er hier die beiden Fragen, deren Antwort doch eine ist ... 43

Oedipus, obsessed by the desire to discover his origin, then proceeded in 1076-85 to challenge Fortune; he was prepared to face the worst and the best that truth could reveal. This was his last bid for freedom from his destiny, and it was his last illusion. The significance of this frightening proclamation is brought out by Ehrenberg who says:

It is equally clear that Oedipus, in claiming to be the son of Chance, has gone beyond the bounds of tradition and religion. At that moment, he is only just entering the circle of increasing knowledge about himself. He realizes that his life is ruled by outer forces, but he does not yet realize their tremendous and cruel power. The foundations of his life have gone, but his great and powerful mind knows of no despair. He still relies on his own genius, and it is indeed the very core of his tragedy that, by using his high intellect honestly and uncompromisingly, he brings doom upon himself. 44

The third stasimon (1086-1109) provided an important psychological development of the play. The chorus had caught Oedipus' mood and had even

43 Diller, op. cit., p. 21.
44 Ehrenberg, op. cit., pp. 69-70.
enhanced it with their own hopes. The infectiousness of the irrational confidence of Oedipus and the illusions that had caused it were now evident. When the chorus hailed Oedipus as the son of a god, this was the tragic development of the motif introduced at line 32. There the priest addressed the prince, to whom his people had come as suppliants, not indeed as a god, but almost as a god. Later, the king had heaped insults on the minister of Apollo. Then, the chorus had contrasted the little wisdom and the short-lived power of mortals with the wisdom of Zeus and Apollo. Now, just before the truth, which he himself had sought, shattered the happiness of the hero, Oedipus spoke of himself as set apart from the vicissitudes of ordinary humanity, a favorite of the goddess Fortune, and her son. The chorus responded by praising him as indeed a son of the immortals, child of Apollo, Pan, Hermes, and Dionysus. This song, at the moment before disaster, truly showed the climax of the tragic illusion inherent in the play.

This disaster came in the fourth epeisodion (1110-85) which contained the sixth and final encounter—Oedipus' confrontation with the Corinthian messenger and the Theban herdsman. At this point, Oedipus was totally absorbed with the thought of discovering his origin. He wished to know who he was, but, with an exaltation that was on the brink of delirium, he assumed that the discovery would bring him joy.

The scene opened with Oedipus standing on the palace steps. The old servant, the sole survivor of the murder, was seen approaching. The king spoke in the tones of self-restraint, like a judge, determined to sift all the evidence. He inquired of the chorus as to the identity of the herdsman:
... Can you, perchance,
Be certain? You have seen, and know the man.\textsuperscript{45}

The contrast between guessing and knowledge showed the effort of the king
to recover the exact balance of a sane mind, to be sure of his knowledge,
so that the joy might be greater. It should be remembered that Oedipus had
originally summoned the shepherd to see whether he would speak of \textit{ληστας},
or of one \textit{ληστήν} (842). But meanwhile a further question had arisen. Was
this man identical with that herdsman of Laius (1040) who had given up the
infant Oedipus to the Corinthian shepherd? With his coming, the two threads
of discovery were brought together. Diller says:

\dots und erst durch die Gegenüberstellung des Boten aus Korin
th und des alten Dieners des Laios, der ihm dem Korinther
einst als Kind übergab, findet er die eine Antwort, die alle
Fragen löst, wie eine Lösung die scheinbar sinnlos divergier-
enden Bestandteile eines Rätsels sinnvoll zusammenfasst.\textsuperscript{46}

Oedipus began the questioning. The effect of this scene hinged on
the realization that, while both the Corinthian and the Theban possessed
true knowledge of the facts of Oedipus' origin and his murder of Laius,
neither of them had \textit{complete} knowledge. The old Theban servant and herdsman
had no notion at this time that this Oedipus was the long-forgotten infant.
He had one secret on his mind, namely that Oedipus had slain Laius. The
Corinthian knew that Oedipus was the child given him by the Theban but he
did not know that the child was the son of Laius and Jocasta. Therefore,

\textsuperscript{45}O.T., op. cit., 1115-16.

\textsuperscript{46}Diller, op. cit., p. 21.
partial knowledge of the facts constituted the dramatic effectiveness of this confrontation.

Slowly the full truth was brought out. The Theban revealed that he had given the Corinthian a child (1156), who had been from the house of Laius (1167), and who was the child of Laius (1171). It is interesting to note in this series of questions that Oedipus was still laboring under the illusion that he might prove to be the son of a slave. The old man's answer in 1168 left quite vague the question of parentage. Any member of Laius' household, whether related to the king or not, might have been described as the father of a "child of the house of Laius." Oedipus, still dreading that he was of servile birth, hoped to be told that his father was ἀγανήσ, and had no thought that Laius himself might prove to be his father. At 1173 Oedipus knew the truth but, for one great moment, he resisted it. In 1177 he asked a question, which, in the final moment of tragic truth, revealed a deep insight into Oedipus' character; for

characteristic of his intelligence is his insistence on complete knowledge and clarity. He demands a rational foundation for his existence: he admits no mysteries, no half-truths, no half-measures. He will never rest content with less than the full truth. . . . A striking example of his insistence on full understanding is the last question he asks the shepherd. He already knows the truth—that Jocasta was his mother and Laius his father—yet there is one detail he does not understand. It is not a detail that offers any hope that the whole story may be false, it is merely a question of the shepherd's motive. "Why did you give the child to this old man?" (1177). Even at the most terrible moment of his existence, he must have the full story, with no trace of obscurity in it anywhere. He must complete the process of inquiry, remove the last ambiguity. 47

47 Knox, Oedipus at Thebes, pp. 18-19.
And so, the Theban herdsman had shattered Oedipus' last illusion. The truth was out. Oedipus knew who he was. The answers to all the questions of the play were one: OEDIPUS. And, when Oedipus shouted

Alas! It comes! And all is true! 48

he himself at last realized his tragic state; for, in using the optative εἴηκοι, he was saying that all of this must have come true, that all the efforts of his human intellect had only revealed the very thing the gods, through Teiresias and the oracles, had foretold him would necessarily come true. The result of this human search was the awful anxiety that had accompanied it and the tragic suffering that would follow it.

Following this scene, Oedipus, the seeker after truth, was removed from sight. He would soon return, but this time as a self-blinded man, obedient to the gods. Meanwhile, the chorus commented on the tragic action which had transpired before their eyes and, in so doing, they expressed a basic insight into the human nature portrayed in action on stage:

Ah! Generations of mankind!
Living, I count your life as nothingness.
None hath more of happiness,
None that mortal is, than this:
But to seem to be, and then,
Having seemed, to fall.
Thine, O unhappy Oedipus,
Thine is the fatal destiny,
That bids me call no mortal creature blest. 49

48 O.T., op. cit., 1182.

49 Ibid., 1186-96.
Therefore, man lived a life that was (ποιησις) "nothing," for his happiness was just an (δοκειν, δολοβον) "appearance," a "delusion," which eventually led him on to a (ἀποκλίνατο) "falling away," to destruction.

With this a messenger came and related how Oedipus had indeed fallen away from the seeming happiness which had surrounded his high position in life. He described how Oedipus had blinded himself, an act by which Oedipus symbolised the limited nature of man. Oedipus' words, as related by the messenger, revealed this:

"Henceforth," he cried, "be dark!—since ye have seen Whom ye should ne'er have seen, and never knew Them that I longed to find."50

In physically blinding his eyes Oedipus was symbolising the blindness that had permeated them all along; for they had been capable of providing him with only limited and imperfect knowledge, knowledge which, being incomplete, had deluded him into thinking that he was clearly seeing the truth at each moment in his search.

When Oedipus returned to the stage, he was a humbled man, once pre-eminent in apparent wisdom, but now placing himself under the judgment of

50Ibid. 1273-74.
the gods who alone could decide when human wisdom was at fault. Oedipus now understood where true knowledge was to be found, for, when Creon suggested that they try to learn clearly what should be done with Oedipus, the king replied:

What? Will you ask for one so lost as I? 51

And Creon replied:

Surely, and you will now believe the god. 52

The play was at an end, and its closing note was a renewed insistence on the heroic nature of Oedipus; the play ended as it had begun—with the greatness of the hero; but it was a different kind of greatness. This greatness was now based on knowledge and not, as before, on ignorance; and this new knowledge was, like that of Socrates, a recognition of man's ignorance. Oedipus saw this and now directed the full force of his intelligence and action to the fulfilment of the oracular command that the murderer of Laius be killed or exiled.

In this play Sophocles revealed that the gods humbled Oedipus as a lesson to men not to trust in the happiness which they found in the confidence in their knowledge. Oedipus eventually attained the knowledge about himself which the gods had known all along. But why did it take him so long? And why did he have to undergo so many torments to reach a truth which the gods had revealed to him from the beginning? The answers to these

51Ibid. 1444. 52Ibid. 1445.
questions should provide a better understanding of the true nature of human and divine knowledge and the possible unity of the two.

At the very core of human knowledge lay its chief characteristic so evidently displayed in the action of the Oedipus Tyrannus—its inability to see the whole truth at one time and the effects that followed therefrom. Marjorie Barstow says that

Oedipus lacks the one vital and essential element in this happiness—the power to see the relation of one thing to another and to maintain a due proportion in the expenditure of energy. Oedipus can see only one thing at a time, and it is his habit to act immediately on half-knowledge with the utmost intensity and abandon. . . . This is the flaw in the character of Oedipus—a weakness at the very centre of his being, from which all other weaknesses, such as his fatal tendency to anger, naturally arise. 53

Therefore, throughout the play, Oedipus received pieces of information—some true, some false. His reaction was always to act immediately, not bothering to see the relation of a single fact to the whole. Teiresias told him of his guilt, but Oedipus immediately jumped to the conclusion that Creon and Teiresias had been conspiring against him. Jocasta intervened to stop the quarrel between her husband and her brother, but, in attempting to show the absurdity of the charge that Oedipus had murdered Laius, she gave him the clue to his guilt. The final discovery depended on putting together the evidence of two parties each of whom knew only half the truth. The Theban herdsman knew that the child he had been ordered to expose was Jocasta's and that Laius had been killed by Oedipus; he did

not know that Oedipus was the child. The Corinthian messenger knew that Oedipus was the baby he had received from the Theban but he did not know that the baby was the son of Laius and Jocasta. In all of this Oedipus was constantly weaving between the unified truth as revealed by the oracles and the pieces of information that came to him. These pieces, because they divided the unity of the whole truth, prolonged Oedipus' search to an ever painful conclusion.

But this situation was not peculiar to Oedipus; for man necessarily lived in a world of illusion and conjecture, which could provide him with only partial knowledge. When Oedipus had first heard the oracle that he was to kill his father and marry his mother, he had no idea that Polybus and Merope were not his true parents. If he could have foreseen this and understood the oracle with all its implications, then he would never have returned to Thebes, his true home. But, this was not to be; for, even though the deity spoke in the language of divine knowledge in oracles, man understood according to the capabilities of his intellect and necessarily false.

Therefore, the god at Delphi always seemed to speak ambiguously, but only because of man's way of understanding. Man looked upon things as isolated, but these things eventually were always found to belong together. So, the irony of man's existential situation was that, because he lived among illusions, those things which seemed to him most strange and disconnected were actually the most important for the true knowledge of himself. And so, both Oedipus and Jocasta doubted the oracles because his life had been so shaped that he was ignorant of his parricide and incest, and because she did not know that the child she thought had perished on
Cithaeron had lived to kill his father and marry his mother.

In contrast to the one-sided, incomplete knowledge that was peculiar to human nature, there was divine knowledge—simple, unconditional, unambiguous, and complete. The knowledge of the deity was complete because it saw all at once the unified truth lying behind the world of man. It saw this unity because it was the unity. Sophocles considered Law to be the grounding principle for this equating of the deity with the unity of truth, for in the words of the chorus:

Be the prize of all my days
In every word, in every deed,
Purity, with Reverence.
Laws thereof are set before us.
In the heights they move.54

It was Law which ordered and ruled all human affairs, and its creator, the deity, had total knowledge of those affairs. Law, therefore, was the philosophical foundation for prophecy, for

as there is a Law, its operation can be predicted. The philosophical function of prophecy therefore is the same as the function of the rest of the divine background: it assumes that the events occur not as etuchae; they are not merely what happened in this particular case. They were bound to happen in this or in some similar way, because human affairs obey law.
If there were no law, not even a god could prophesy.55

Therefore, a prophecy was a prediction made by a god who, unlike men, knew all the facts and could therefore see in advance how the situation must necessarily

54O.T., op. cit., 863-66.
work out. If life were random, as Jocasta said it was, then divine prophecy would be totally unfounded. For Sophocles, then, there must have been divine law underlying everything.

The gods communicated to men their true, unified knowledge of governing Law through the medium of oracles, omens, and seers. Once the Law had been set, it never changed; and so, the divine knowledge was a foreknowledge, an understanding of what, having been determined by Law, would work itself out in time. Man's only link with this foreknowledge was through the oracles and seers. Their importance for Sophocles can never be stressed too much, for they were the very framework of his plots. As one author puts it:

They are the justification for the traditional religion. If they are not true, there is no reason for believing in the gods. The Chorus sing in the **Tyrannus**, 'I will not go to worship at the inviolate navel of the earth . . . if these (oracles) do not come true, clear for all men to show. . . . For Laius' old prophecies are fading and men thrust them aside, and nowhere is clear honour paid to Apollo but religion is perishing.'

This distress of the chorus, however, was vindicated by the remainder of the **Tyrannus** which demonstrated that the gods had the full complete knowledge which Oedipus thought he had. He was proved ignorant; real knowledge was what distinguished god from man. Since the gods had total knowledge, their action was confident and sure. They acted with the swift decision which was characteristic of Oedipus but which was misplaced in him; and their action was just. It was a justice based on perfect knowledge but it could also be angry. This was the type of justice Oedipus had tried to

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administer to Teiresias and Creon, but his justice was based on ignorance and was therefore injustice. These attributes of divinity—knowledge, certainty, justice—were the qualities Oedipus thought he possessed; and that was why he was the perfect example of the inadequacy of human knowledge, certainty, and justice.

And so, divine and human knowledge have been discussed—one complete, the other incomplete. How then could man, since he was not even able to fully understand the oracles, ever completely unite himself with the gods' will? If the gods' knowledge of the truth of the world was never totally accessible to men due to man's natural intellectual blindness, then could there ever be an effective union of human and divine knowledge? Kitto states the problem and offers a solution:

He [Sophocles] well knows that the world is not a cozy, fully intelligible place in which happiness is proportionate to virtue, and faults are not punished beyond their deserts; yet he protests that it is not a random, arbitrary universe in which religion is idle and virtue meaningless. It is based on order, logos, Reason; on a Reason which includes human reason but vastly transcends it. The gods can see the whole pattern of the Universe; Man cannot. Yet we can see, and try to follow, an important part of it: modesty, purity in word and deed, reverence, respect for the immutable 'unwritten laws.'

If man did this, he was gaining the essential and fundamental knowledge which Sophocles would have wished every man to acquire—knowledge of himself, especially about himself in relation to the gods. A man did not know himself or anything at all, until he understood his relationship with the gods. And, in order to do this, it was necessary for him to realize that, because

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his knowledge was limited, he must acknowledge his dependence on the gods for guidance. In this play Sophocles depicted one way in which this could be achieved, for he portrayed a man who

... in his quest for knowledge of things about him, neglected the one great science which every man must master, the science of self-knowledge and the principle of the golden mean. The play is a tragedy of a man who through suffering and mistakes comes to a purified knowledge of himself and of the value of the other Delphic motto (Nothing in Excess). In this Sophocles has shown us the elemental struggle which takes place in the soul of every man of any strength or ability as he attempts to find his place in the world of men and gods.58

Therefore, there were two alternatives: trust and obey the gods from the very beginning by acknowledging your limitations and your dependence on the gods or come to this self-knowledge as Oedipus did—through the painful investigation by a limited intellect. This was the lesson of the Oedipus Tyrannus.

CHAPTER V

OEDIPUS: AN EXAMPLE FOR FIFTH-CENTURY ATHENIAN MAN

After discussing the doctrine of the difference between human and divine knowledge, both in its origins among the early poets and philosophers, and dramatically worked out in Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus, all that remains to be shown is how this theory answered the ever-growing rationalistic spirit of fifth-century Athens discussed in Chapter III. To discover this it might be well to turn to the most famous choral ode of the Oedipus Tyrannus, the 4th stasimon (1186-1222) which began ἱῶ γένει βροτῶν.

Here, the chorus, having seen how vain mortal life was, compared Oedipus in his early greatness as king with his present miserable state. But the chorus did not consider Oedipus an exception to mankind in general, for they looked upon him as

a paradigm, an example to all men; and the fact that he is a tyrannos, self-made ruler, the proverbial Greek example of worldly success won by individual intelligence and exertion, makes him an appropriate symbol of civilized man, who was beginning to believe, in the 5th century B.C., that he could seize control of his environment and make his own destiny become, in fact, equated to the gods.¹

For that was what Oedipus was, a proof, a demonstration. He was an example

to all mankind of the existence and authority of divine foreknowledge and of the fundamental ignorance of man. This function of Oedipus helped to explain the character which Sophocles had given him. The demonstration of the proposition through the person of a bad man clearly would have been untragic, even uninteresting; and the demonstration of it through the person of an Aristotelian hero, the good man who wrecks himself through a "fault," would have obscured the issue by suggesting an explanation of Oedipus’ fall in terms of human ethics and morality. The divine demonstration needed a protagonist whose character did not obscure the meaning of his fall: the affirmation of the existence of divine foreknowledge and the ignorance of man could not be confused by a current of feeling that Oedipus’ catastrophe could be attributed to a moral fault. Oedipus must have been a tragic character in the same way as any man in his position would have been—the human intellect was the key.

However, in order not to obscure the meaning of Oedipus’ fall, Sophocles necessarily portrayed a character, which, by its very nature, brought home the lesson all the more emphatically, not only to the rest of men, but especially to Oedipus around whom the play was centered. For as C. M. Bowra states:

The gods have chosen Oedipus for his fate. In so far as he is to be an example to others it is enough that he is a great king. But the lesson that he himself has to learn must be suited to his own nature. The man who is to be taught his own utter insignificance must be endowed with special gifts of character and intellect; for only in such conditions is the lesson worth learning.2

2 Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, p. 185.
It was through the eyes of Oedipus that man must learn the lesson. Therefore, it was mainly through the actions themselves of Oedipus that man would learn the lesson. Even though the chorus would help to bring this lesson home to the audience, it was primarily through Oedipus' self-recognition that man learned, for in this self-recognition of Oedipus, man recognizes himself. Man measures himself and the result is that man is not the measure of all things. The chorus, which rejected number and all that it stood for, has learned to count; and states the result of the great calculation. "Generations of man that must die, I add up the total of your life and find it equal to zero."

Sophocles, then, did offer Oedipus as a universal paradigm for man. Through his portrayal of the conflict between human and divine knowledge in the Oedipus Tyrannus, Sophocles rose above the particular problem of knowledge and used it only as a means to reach a higher concept—that of man himself. But how did Sophocles use this concept of knowledge to reveal the nature of man? Werner Jaeger, in his monumental work Paideia, states:

Like Aeschylus, Sophocles thinks of drama as the instrument through which men reach a sublime knowledge. But it is not to phronein, which was the ultimate certainty and necessity in which Aeschylus found peace. It is rather a tragical self-knowledge, the Delphic gnothi seauton deepened and broadened into a comprehension of the shadowy nothingness of human strength and human happiness. To know oneself is thus for Sophocles to know man's powerlessness; but it is also to know the indestructible and conquering majesty of suffering humanity. The agony of every Sophoclean character is an essential element in his nature.4


4Jaeger, op. cit., p. 281.
The key word in the previous quotation would be the "nothingness" of human strength, of human existence in general. What Sophocles seemed to be saying in this play was that man of his very nature was limited, was doomed to live in a world as a finite being, obedient to the infinite gods. This theory resembles very much the thought of many of the modern philosophers of our time. It placed an emphasis on the existential side of man, on his limitations, and on the seeming impossibility to overcome them. One modern writer expresses it this way:

Human finitude is the presence of the not in the being of man. That mode of thought which cannot understand negative existence cannot fully understand human finitude. Finitude is a matter of human limitations, and limitations involve what we cannot do or cannot be. Our finitude, however, is not the mere sum of our limitations; rather, the fact of human finitude brings us to the center of man, where positive and negative existence coincide and interpenetrate to such an extent that a man's strength coincides with his pathos, his vision with his blindness, his truth with his untruth, his being with his non-being. And if human finitude is not understood, neither is the nature of man.  

In Oedipus, as well as in all of men, the chief evidence for this finitude of man showed up, according to Sophocles, in the area of knowledge. For Sophocles showed how man was not able to know or understand the world in which he lived. It was the lack of knowledge, this not-knowing that so characterized Oedipus, and yet, it was also this very characteristic which drove Oedipus on to his eventual doom. László Versenyi, a young classical critic with an existential bent, expresses it well, when he says:

Knowledge necessarily leads to negative results and to the opposite of what the knower intends if the subject of knowledge

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is by its very nature not amenable to rational inquiry. If the world is, by its nature, not open to man's limited insight, intelligence is man's doom rather than his salvation. Given man's daimon—that he must know—and the irrationality that lies at the heart of things, it is not any particular human act but human existence itself that is tragic, and the fault lies not in Oedipus as this particular man but in Oedipus as Man living in a world which is, ultimately, not made for man the knower.6

What Versenyi is saying here, and what I think Sophocles would also say, is that knowledge is very uncertain for man and this because the very world he lives in, the very life he leads is also uncertain and therefore unintelligible for him in great part. The characters of Oedipus and Jocasta were symbolic of a generation which had abandoned a traditional order of belief with a hopeful vision of an intelligible universe, only to find itself at last facing an incomprehensible future with a desperation thinly disguised as recklessness, a fact so evident in the contemporary Peloponnesian War. Sophocles, therefore, told his audience to look to their traditional beliefs, for here, even with their limited sight, they could make their way in this world. The Universe for Sophocles was ruled by Law which was revealed by the gods. Man's only hope was to follow it. To neglect it, to follow one's own law, was folly.

In summary, then, what belonged to Sophocles' own attitude toward life was

a form of pessimism which sees man as a creature of limited insight, whose vision is easily befogged with delusions and who is, in general, powerless and insignificant in any

comparison with the real possessors of power, the gods. 7

If, then, man was not able to understand fully the world in which he lived, just what knowledge did he acquire? Bowra's answer to this question is as follows:

The knowledge acquired by the characters is about themselves, but primarily about themselves in relation to the gods. For Sophocles this is the essential and fundamental knowledge. A man does not know himself or his place until he knows how he stands with the gods. This is obvious with Ajax, Creon, Oedipus, and Philoctetes. They are taught directly who they are and what they must do. When at last they understand the divine will, they have no more illusions and accept their condition. 8

The Delphic temple had two inscriptions for the edification of the worshipper which might well apply here when speaking of Oedipus' tragedy. The first inscription was the negative "Nothing Too Much"; the other was positive, but closely akin to the first: "Know Thyself." That meant for Oedipus the tragic discovery of his pollution. It also meant this: "Know that you are but a man, the creature of a day; and, knowing this, be modest and be prudent. Remember that the greatest gift of the gods is not cleverness nor power nor wealth nor fame, but the spirit of 'Sophrosyne'." This Sophrosyne was the spirit of the man who knew that he was mortal and in all things shunned excess. Oedipus did not have this spirit when the play opened.

Before the order which Oedipus had broken by killing his father and marrying his mother could be restored, the evil that had been done, even though unconsciously committed, must have shown its full force. This it did in

7 Opstelten, op. cit., p. 148.
8 Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, p. 365.
the growth of Oedipus' illusions, when the plague forced a crisis on him. From illusions he moved to dangerous acts. His fits of fury, his moments of scepticism, his certainty that he was right, were the natural products of his state. Such a condition could not last, and it was broken by the events which followed the death of Polybus. As Oedipus came to see the truth and punish himself for his past actions, he made his peace with the gods. He did what was right, accepted his position, knew the truth. Through resignation and suffering the rightful harmony of things was restored.

At the end of the play Oedipus was reduced to as low as a man could go. He seemed to be more of a figure to be abhorred than a tragic figure to be pitied. How was the audience to be uplifted by what they had seen? Bowra says that

by divine standards Oedipus at the end of the play is a better man than at the beginning. His humiliation is both a lesson to others and to him. Democritus' words, "the foolish learn modesty in misfortune," (fr. 54) may be applied to Oedipus, who has indeed been foolish in his mistakes and illusions and has been taught modesty through suffering. The lesson which the gods convey through his fall is all the more impressive because he is the great king and the great man he is. In the eyes of the gods what matters is that he should know who and what he really is. To secure this end his power and his glory must be sacrificed. In his acceptance of his fall, his readiness to take part in it, Oedipus shows a greatness nobler than when he read the riddle of the Sphinx and became king of Thebes.\footnote{Ibid. 209.}

Oedipus was now greater than he had ever been because he had learned what Sophocles thought every man should learn, that man can only do his best to understand the gods by what means he
possesses, to recognize that his own judgement may be wrong. The gods, who know everything, are right. Nor may man complain of them. He must humble himself before them and admit that he is nothing and that he knows nothing. This is the lesson of King Oedipus.¹⁰

¹⁰Ibid. 209.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by James C. L. Arimond, S.J.
has been read and approved by the director of the thesis.
Furthermore, the final copies have been examined by the
director and the signature which appears below verifies
the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated,
and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference
to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Feb 2 - 1968
Date

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